

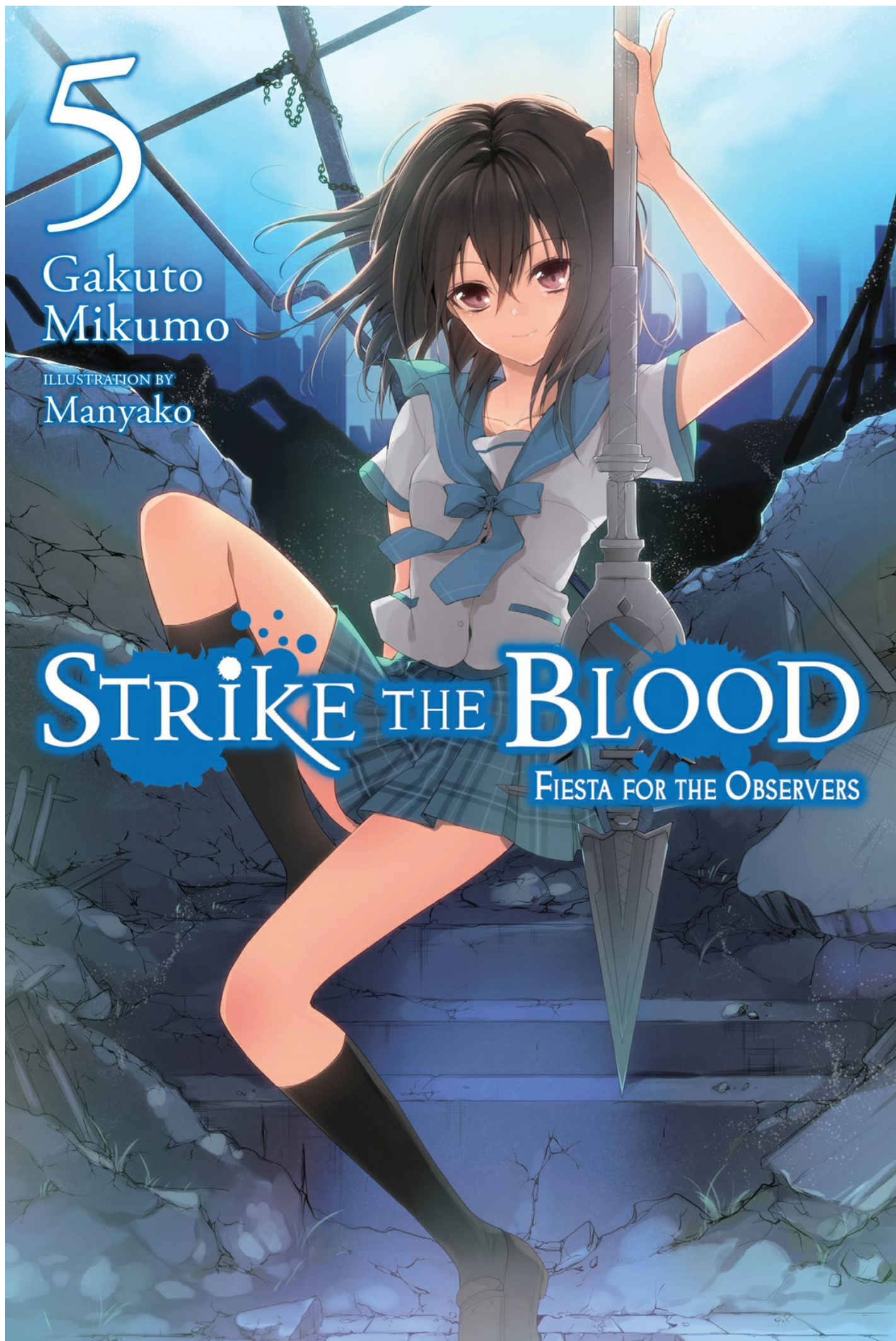
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Gakuto
Mikumo

ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako

STRIKE THE BLOOD

FIESTA FOR THE OBSERVERS



VISIT...

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5 STRIKE THE BLOOD

FIESTA FOR THE OBSERVERS

Gakuto Mikumo
Illustration by Manyako



Asagi Aiba

Cyber Empress

Gorgeous, selfish
high school cyber genius

Sana

The Backup

Transitory time-stolen
little girl

Kojou Akatsuki

The Fourth Primogenitor

The world's mightiest—and
laziest—vampire



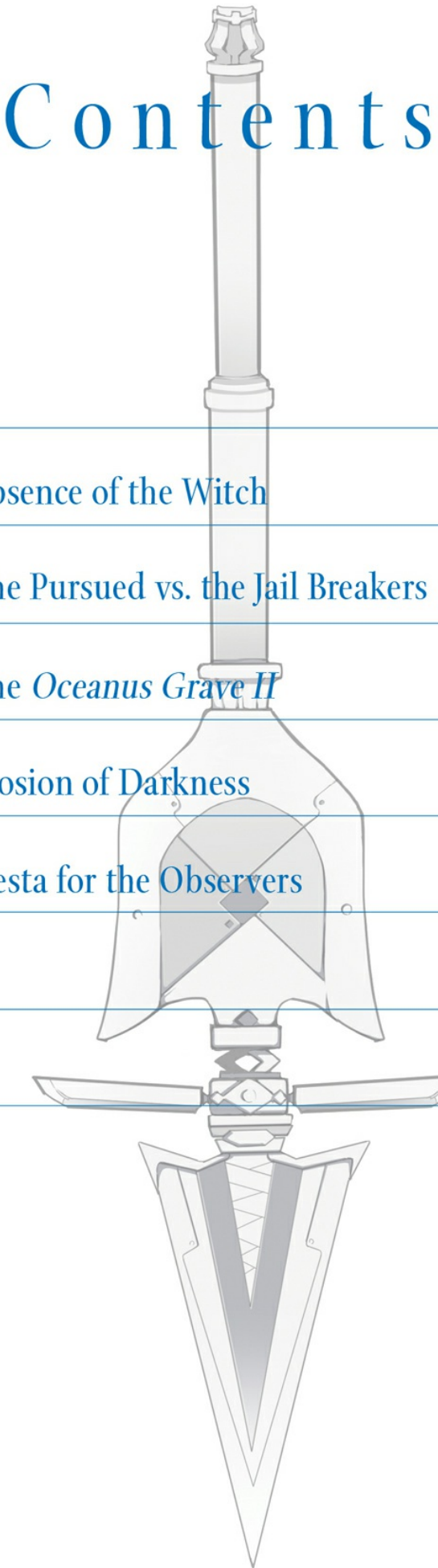
Sayaka Kirasaka
Shamanic War Dancer
Elegant dancer and marksman

Yukina Himeragi
Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer



Dimitrie Vattler
Duke of Ardeal
Frivolous noble and Master of Serpents

Aya Tokoyogi
Witch of the Notaria
The dark observer who seeks
to rewrite the world



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STRIKE THE BLOOD

FIESTA FOR THE OBSERVERS

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GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

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STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 5

GAKUTO MIKUMO

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque Cover art by Manyako

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Edited by ASCII MEDIA WORKS

First published in Japan in 2012 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

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Yen On

1290 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10104

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First Yen On Edition: January 2017

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Mikumo, Gakuto, author. | Manyako, artist. | Bourque, Jeremiah, translator.

Title: Strike the blood. Volume 5, Fiesta for the observers / Gakuto Mikumo, Manyako ; translation by Jeremiah Bourque.

Other titles: Fiesta for the observers Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2017. | Series: Strike the blood ; 5

Identifiers: LCCN 2015041522 | ISBN 9780316345569 (paperback) Subjects: | CYAC: Science fiction. | Vampires—Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Science Fiction / Adventure.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.M555 Sti 2017 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2015041522>

ISBNs: 978-0-31634556-9 (paperback) 978-0-316-34557-6 (ebook)

E3-20170210-JV-PC

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INTRO

“Nothing is finished yet. Nothing—”

Leaving those words behind, the girl turned her back on the vampire aristocrat.

She was a small girl, one who appeared to be in her mid-teens. She did look young for her age, but it was nothing extreme. If one had to name things about her that stood out, all that really counted might be her long hair’s quirky style and her friendly face. In other words, she was a common, everyday middle school girl.

She was wearing a black one-piece dress with a tail attached. On her head, she wore a headband with what looked like kitty ears. No doubt it was a costume meant to evoke a black cat. It was a showy and cute outfit for a girl to wear to a festival.

However, the girl’s scarlet, wide-open eyes reflected no emotion whatsoever. Only her lips formed the slightest traces of a smile. The expression she wore seemed somehow...inhuman.

It felt like the body of a very ordinary girl was being shared by an inhuman monster.

On one level, it was a fitting image for a resident of that city to have: that of a Demon Sanctuary, home of the bizarre. A metropolis of everlasting twilight, where humans and demons lived side by side.

A handsome, blond, blue-eyed man called out to the girl as she walked off.

“—Where do you think you’re going, twelfth?”

The girl quietly came to a stop and sent a cold scowl back at the man.

His name was Dimitrie Vattler, a nobleman and envoy from the Warlord’s Empire. He was a pureblood vampire, a direct descendant of the First Primogenitor, the Lost Warlord.

Served by nine fiendish Beast Vassals, the handsome monster was rumored to be “the closest thing to a primogenitor.”

However, the white, three-piece suit he wore was singed and tattered; his entire body was covered in countless scars, as if it had once been ripped to shreds. In other words, the wounds he’d suffered from the girl’s attack had still not fully healed.

His blood, boiling from the heat of friction, emitted a foul odor; bones and tendons were still exposed through the cracks in his half-regenerated skin. Even so, a ferocious smile came over him as he pointed behind him.

The surface of the sea glimmered, bathed in the light of the sun. A tiny island, surrounded by bare rock, floated upon it. Atop the land stood an ancient stonework cathedral. This was the sealed land where fiendish criminals were banished to another world, the fortress that protected the so-called “prison barrier.”

But the giant cathedral was already half-ruined, as if the gate to hell itself had been opened. It was yet unclear if Natsuki Minamiya, the key to the seal, was dead or alive—

Vattler’s taunting continued:

“It looks quite fun over there, doesn’t it? Are you sure you want to walk away? Or perhaps you can’t lay a hand on it?”

The girl in the black cat outfit gazed evenly at the young aristocrat, unmoved.

“Do you wish to be blown into five pieces again, Master of Serpents?”

Amid the dazzling rays of the setting sun, a giant illusion, translucent like a glacier, rose above the girl’s head once more.

The upper half looked like a human woman; the lower half, like the body and tail of a beautiful fish. Wings came out of her back. She had claws ending in sharp talons. She looked like an icy mermaid or perhaps even a siren.

It was a mass of magical energy so vast that it took physical form. This was a summoned beast, a creature from another world that dwelled in a vampire’s own blood. It was a beast that served; in other words, a Beast Vassal.

This one was Alrescha Glacies, Azure Princess of Ice, the twelfth Beast Vassal that served the World's Mightiest Vampire, the Fourth Primogenitor—

The beautiful, ice-colored Beast Vassal, like subzero taking a physical form, raised a fist.

Vattler calmly looked up at that fist and smiled. “Nope. I regret to inform you, I no longer have any interest in you. It's boring fighting an opponent I *know* I'll beat. Now's not the time to play with you. You should regain your proper power, the sooner the better—”

The Beast Vassal unleashed its attack even before the young man finished speaking. The air cracked open with a high-pitched, destructive ringing.

With Vattler standing in the center, the breakwater was annihilated without a trace. In a single instant, the man-made surface was frozen to absolute zero, with the resulting impact smashing the new, brittle substance into tiny pieces.

The overwhelming destruction was exceptionally rapid, silent, and merciless. All that was left behind was a dense, white mist and the frozen ground. However, there was no sign of Vattler having been harmed by it. The wounded, youthful lord had transformed into golden mist and fled a mere moment before the Beast Vassal's attack had activated.

Confirming for herself that his aura was now distant, the girl's eyes remained emotionless as she slumped her shoulders. It was oddly human behavior reminiscent of the proper owner of that body.



The girl dressed like a black cat had employed a Beast Vassal in her strike upon the vampire aristocrat.

The low-temperature shock wave made the very air creak. Crystals like transparent snow danced down from the sky, freezing the surface of the sea white.

Someone standing on a train that was stopped atop a far-removed pier observed the beautiful scene. She was a cherubic-faced woman wearing a wrinkled white coat.

Her face was more “cute” than “beautiful”; she was neither short nor tall. However, she *did* have very large breasts.

She was finishing eating a Popsicle with all the fervor of an addict.

Perhaps she was half-asleep, given the way her long hair was disheveled and how her eyelids were half-shuttered. But even without the vacant look, it was clear at a glance that she was a very lazy adult.

“Fuahhh...”

Making what looked like a very relaxed yawn, she wiped away the wetness from the corners of her eyes.

She tossed the Popsicle into the car’s ashtray and took a fresh one out of a cooler box on the passenger seat. She then opened the driver’s side door and got out of the car, obviously annoyed.

As she stood up, her large breasts swayed heavily. Apparently, she wasn’t wearing a bra under there. However, she showed no sign of noticing that. Instead, she filled her mouth with the sweet, running her tongue over it as if to savor the taste. It came across as particularly sexual.

She lifted her head when she noticed footsteps approaching.

A teenage girl dressed in an outfit evoking a black cat appeared out of the snowy mist that hovered about.

Noticing that the woman in white seemed to have been waiting for her, the girl stopped walking. Her large emotionless eyes looked upon the woman.

The cat girl asked sharply:

“You...saw, did you not?”

“Mhmm,” went the woman in white as she smiled. She rolled the ice around in her mouth. Once she was certain the girl’s body had no external injuries, she narrowed her eyes a bit.

“You protected her...thank you.”

The girl seemed a bit thrown off at the show of thanks, replying:

“...I merely acted in accordance with the pact. It is nothing you are required to

thank me for.”

It was like she had a far harder time dealing with this woman than with the aristocrat.

Seeing the girl’s reaction, the woman in white took out a new Popsicle from the cooler.

“Mhmm...want some?”

Looking at the treat offered to her, the girl who had commanded the icy Beast Vassal clicked her tongue in apparent dismay.

The next moment, light seemed to vanish from her eyes. It felt like the powerful will that had taken hold of her petite frame had vanished. The girl went completely limp, like a marionette with its strings cut, and gently fell.

The woman in white made a pained smile as she supported the fallen body.

“My, my...”

Listlessly, the woman in white gazed at the twinkling sky.

The surface of the sea, illuminated by the setting sun, twinkled red like a smoldering flame. The nearby buildings cast long shadows, but the man-made ground of steel and resin was dyed a bluish black. This was Itogami City, the Demon Sanctuary floating some 330 kilometers south of Tokyo.

However, the throngs of humanity packing the streets showed no signs of diminishing, even as sunfall fast approached.

The buildings, illuminated by fireworks, were cast a myriad of colors; this only added to the vivid hustle and bustle of commerce alongside the noisy crowd gathered in the square.

This was the last day of October: the night of the Demon Sanctuary’s famed celebration, the Hollow Eve Festival.

The festivities had only just begun.



After a strict biometrics security scan, the super-hard metal alloy bulkhead opened up. The girl who’d used her pass to exit the gate was in her mid-teens.

She had an extravagant hairstyle, and her clothing was accessorized with a refined fashion sense.

Her face marked her as a high school girl. However, at that moment, an air of fatigue wafted around her entire body; she looked like someone finally free after being worked to the bone.

“Aaah...so...tiiiired...”

Asagi Aiba murmured this to herself as she stretched upward, little vigor behind the gesture.

Her eyes had bags under them as she gazed at the rays of the setting sun, reflecting off the windows of the building she was currently in.

It was the giant inverted pyramid known as the Keystone Gate, pretty much smack-dab in the middle of Itogami Island. Armed Island Guard patrolmen were shuffling off both loitering citizens blocking the way and curious onlookers gathered around from the building’s lobby.

The roof of the giant building, the tallest on Itogami Island, had been enemy-occupied territory held by the internationally wanted sorcerous criminals, the Meyer Sisters, only a few dozen minutes earlier. Even with the blockade finally lifted, its effects could still be felt.

“Aww, geez, this totally sucks. Why’d I have to be stuck at my part-time job even on a holiday?! It’s inhumane working conditions, it’s just not fair!”

Asagi was holding her smartphone in her right hand as she directed her bitter resentment toward it. A synthetic voice with a sarcastic edge replied from the phone, *“No, no, we’re seriously grateful this time around. We just squeaked by thanks to you, Li’l Miss.”*

The speaker was the artificial intelligence she’d dubbed Mogwai; it was the avatar of the five supercomputers that controlled Itogami Island. In exchange for extremely high capabilities, the support AI had been pegged as extremely quirky and difficult to deal with, but for some reason, Asagi had clicked with it, making her willing to go the extra mile for it.

That very partner abruptly lowered its voice and said to Asagi, *“We’re grateful, but could you stay at the corporation just a bit longer?”*

A very guarded expression came over the human girl.

“Say what?”

She recalled that it was that very AI with the lousy personality that had called her over to the Gigafloat Management Corporation and away from her friends playing tourist without a care.

Thanks to that, Asagi was under heavy strain from having spent the entire night writing up an *extremely* time-consuming program to reverse calculate coordinates from bends in space created by witches; thanks to that, one of her precious festival days had completely gone to waste.

There was no way she was going through more horrible part-time work like that anytime soon.

“What the heck? The Island Guard took care of the witches occupying the gate’s roof, right?” she asked.

Unfortunately, Mogwai reported in a serious tone of voice that was quite out of character for it: *“Well, that’s the end result I suppose... But an unregistered sub-float has appeared in an inlet at Island North. We still don’t know what the Library people are after. I have a bad feelin’ about this.”*

Asagi was beside herself. She sighed.

“Now, hold on a second...you’re just a computer avatar with a twisted personality. Don’t you dare use a phrase like *a bad feelin’* when conveying info. Sheesh...”

Her partner seemed to want to say something more, but she ignored it and cut the smartphone’s power.

It was already past five PM. It was still too bright to see stars in the sky above, but the atmosphere had already begun to have the smell of night about it. The Hollow Eve Festival would be entering its night event phase in short order.

The increase in both male and female spectators on the street wearing *yukata* was no doubt with the upcoming fireworks rally in mind. Even without that, the area around Keystone Gate was one of the island’s hot spots for couples. The existence of so many harmonious couples taking delight in the festival got on

Asagi's nerves oddly enough.

Perhaps right around then, Kojou Akatsuki was getting along famously with that childhood girlfriend of his...?

In a burst of acute anger, Asagi marched toward the monorail station as she muttered, "Just thinking about it makes me sick to my stomach... And while I had to go through all this, no less...!"

She could have chosen to rendezvous with Kojou and the others in a fit of pique, but she at least wanted to go home and change clothes first. It wasn't like Kojou would even notice, but Asagi's pride would not permit her to meet him in the same clothes she'd been wearing since the day before. Besides, Yuuma Tokoyogi was a formidable foe. Asagi needed to be in tip-top condition if she was going to take her on.

The Keystone Gate, at the center of Itogami Island, was served by two monorails: the North Line and the Loop Line. It wouldn't even take fifteen minutes for Asagi to get to the station closest to her house via the Loop Line.

However, around when she arrived at the station, she realized she'd been naive.

She let out a loud "whoa!" without thinking. The crowd inside the station was far larger than anything she'd imagined.

There was a line of customers unable to even get onto the platform that led the way to the ticket booth. The jam-packed throng of customers was so loud and boisterous that the train staff was inaudible.

Asagi stopped at a shop in the corner of the station to buy a drink and asked one of the employees, "...The monorail isn't operating yet?"

An affable-looking middle-aged female employee sent a sympathetic look Asagi's way. "It looks like they're just resuming service to South and East, but I think North might take a little while. There's some odd rumors going around."

"Rumors?"

The woman's shoulders quivered heavily, like even saying the words terrified her. "You've heard about the 'prison barrier'? They say that it showed up."

Of course, Asagi knew of the prison barrier. It was a famous urban legend on Itogami Island.

According to legend, it was an abominable prison built in secret somewhere on the man-made island to isolate the worst of all sorcerous criminals. Supposedly, an innocent man imprisoned there had cursed it, and now it could not be seen; others said it was now a part of the underworld itself. Others still said that the jailer of the prison ward was a Grim Reaper that looked like a beautiful doll...

It was a much-repeated ghost story, but hearing it made Asagi feel an odd twinge in her chest as she raised her eyebrows.

“Come to think of it, Mogwai did say something weird like that, didn’t it...?”

The AI had stated to her that an unregistered sub-float had appeared. She didn’t really think that the sub-float could be the prison barrier, but wondering about the real reason why the LCO witches had kicked up that incident was eating away at her.

As Asagi thought with concern, *I wonder what they’re really after*, the female employee offered her a cold pop bottle.

“Here, come again. Oh, and a little freebie.”

As Asagi held out her hand to accept the bottle, the middle-aged woman grabbed several pieces of candy. But even as Asagi accepted the treat with a “thanks,” she tilted her head slightly. It was a few too many pieces for a freebie.

“It’s so crowded, make sure you and your daughter don’t get separated.”

Asagi was seriously perplexed by the woman’s statement. “Huh? Daughter...?”

What in the world is the old lady talking about...?

But...

Feeling a sudden tug on her skirt, Asagi shifted her gaze to her own feet.

“Eh?! ”

Her eyes went wide—for there stood a very small girl of a tender age.

She couldn't have been more than four, maybe five years old; the little girl had long hair and wore a Western-style, doll-like dress.

Asagi was suddenly worried that the girl might be lost. If so, it was no small matter: There was a thick crowd. Finding a girl's guardian would be very difficult.

Plus, the woman working at the shop had apparently mistaken Asagi for the girl's mother. Certainly, Asagi looked very mature for her age, but it was still a grievous misunderstanding.

I have to clear that up at all costs, thought Asagi as she glared at the employee, but the next moment, the little girl latched onto Asagi's arm.

The girl's moist eyes looked up at Asagi, and in a frail, clingy voice, she announced:

"...Mama!"

All the bustle around them suddenly vanished, replaced by a brief silence.

The older lady in the shop nodded to herself, as if to say, *Just as I thought. Goodness, these young girls nowadays...!*

Asagi went white as the little girl continued to embrace her. The all-too-unexpected development left her unable to even speak the words: *You've got the wrong person!*

With the little girl seeming so uneasy, Asagi couldn't just brush her off, either. Even looking all around, desperate for rescue, there was (but of course) no sight of the girl's real mother.

Utterly unable to comprehend what was going on, Asagi looked up at the setting sun...

"Ehhhhhh?!"

Her cry was swallowed up by the great throng inside the station and vanished.



CHAPTER ONE
ABSENCE OF THE
WITCH

CHAPTER ONE

ABSENCE OF THE WITCH

1

Collapsing—

The cathedral was collapsing.

Stone walls piled as high as the eye could see were falling as if hit by an avalanche; the impact was making the man-made ground shudder fiercely. Scattered fragments of dust and rock were blinding; the interior of the building had been rendered a chaotic darkness. The destructive spectacle could make one think the world was ending.

Kojou had been unable to respond to the all-too-abrupt collapse.

At this rate, he'd soon be buried under an enormous mass of stone; there was little doubt he would perish. What saved Kojou came with a strange, floating feeling resembling dizziness. It was a side effect from being teleported.

Someone had bent space to carry Kojou and the others out of the crumbling cathedral.

With the dazzling rays of the setting sun suddenly shining on him, Kojou instantly averted his eyes.

“Ugh...”

Yukina, silver spear in hand, landed right beside him. They weren't particularly far from the cathedral. The teleport jump had only been maybe a couple hundred meters. It was far enough that they'd escaped the effects of the cathedral's collapse, but only barely.

It was probably the most the caster could do.

Yukina let out a short shriek.

“Yuuma?!”

Behind Kojou, it sounded like something squishy fell to the ground. It was a young woman dressed in a Halloween witch costume. She was too cute to be called boyish, with a perfectly symmetrical face.

However, her entire body was stained with blood; she was a pale shadow of her normal liveliness.

She—Yuuma Tokoyogi—seemed in agony as Kojou bit his lip and rushed to her side.

“Yuuma...! Why’d you do something so reckless...?!”

Her chest bore a deep sword wound. When Kojou touched her arm, it felt as cold as ice.

Yuuma was a witch. She was a human who’d been granted tremendous magical power via a pact with a demon. She’d used her power to warp space and save Kojou and the others from the collapsing cathedral.

However, the reckless teleport had put Yuuma’s body under immense strain.

In the battle that had ended just moments before, she’d expended magical power beyond her limits, her body incurring deep wounds in the process. A normal person might well have died at any moment in the state she was currently in.

Even so, Yuuma rose up and forced a smile onto her face.

“You’re wrong, Kojou... It wasn’t my power alone. The Witch of the Void lent me hers, too...”

Yuuma’s unexpected words made Kojou stare at both of his arms in shock.

“Natsuki? Then where...is she...?!”

Yukina’s expression hardened as well.

Having been run through by the Guardian’s sword, Natsuki Minamiya had surely been wounded even worse than Yuuma. Could she have really lent her power to Yuuma to save Kojou and the others in that state?

However, though Kojou had been carrying her in his arms, she was nowhere to be found. If Natsuki had sent Kojou and the rest outside, yet she herself remained in the cathedral even now— Dumbfounded, Yukina looked up at the place where the cathedral should have been standing.

“Senpai...!”

It was a military fortress with thick steel walls rimmed with barbed wire—no, a *prison*.

Kojou looked up at the oppressive fortress in bewilderment.

“That’s...the real prison barrier...? Then what was the building that was there till now?!”

Compared to Natsuki’s old-fashioned, solemn cathedral, that fortress was filled with malevolence that far better suited the word *prison*. However, the entire facility wavered, half-materialized, within the dust; it seemed to still be repelling all intruders.

What then reached the confused Kojou’s ears were metallic echoes and an eerie female voice. It was the malicious voice of a witch more advanced in her years.

“It is...the same...thing, Fourth Primogenitor.”

The speaker stood atop the giant gate of the fortress.

Her hair was so long that it reached her feet. She wore a noblewoman’s ceremonial robe that looked like it came from the Heian period. The outfit was highly ornamental, but the way it was dyed only in white and black made her look like she was wearing a Grim Reaper costume. Her visage was young and beautiful, but her eyes were the color of flames—of fire. That gaze, part of a gentle smile, boded ill, indicating that she was far beyond the boundaries of humanity.

“—While dreaming, there is no firm dividing line between man and butterfly. That empty cathedral is the form the prison barrier takes when it is part of Natsuki Minamiya’s dream.”

The prison barrier was a virtual world that was constructed inside Natsuki’s

dream via magic. The viewer of the dream could freely alter its form with a thought. The convicts held within, existing in another being's dream, had absolutely no means of escape. That was why it was a feared prison used to seal away only sorcerous criminals of the highest class.

"However," the fire-eyed witch continued, "the Witch of the Void awoke from her eternal dream, and the prison barrier has emerged into reality. Now that it is in real space, escaping from here is no large feat at...all. For me, at least..."

This said, she laughed in apparent delight.

That voice was the same one they'd heard from Yuuma's Guardian—the voice of the sorcerous criminal Aya Tokoyogi, who'd sacrificed her own daughter to plunge her sword into Natsuki Minamiya. But— A despairing voice came from Yuuma's blood-drenched lips.

"Mo...ther...?"

That's insane, shouted Kojou in his mind. *"That's Yuuma's mother...?!"*

He didn't want to accept it, but anyone there would have instantly understood that the fire-eyed witch was connected to Yuuma by blood. After all, the two were the spitting image of each other.

Except for the length of their hair and the color of their eyes, it was hard to tell them apart. Even their dauntless faces and apparent age were identical...

"She's got...the same face as Yuuma...," said Kojou.

As if to mock the shaken boy and the others, Aya pointed to the wounded Yuuma and stated, "Of...course. That girl is a copy produced from me through parthenogenesis. She is no more than my shadow, built for the sole purpose of breaching the prison barrier's seal. She and I are the same being—that is why I can do...*this*."

That moment, blood gushed out of Yuuma's throat as she screamed.

"U...a...aaaaaaaaaaaaa...!"

Behind her, a human-shaped shadow, materialized via magical power, floated up. It was a faceless knight clad in armor. It was a devil familiar granted as part of a pact—in other words, a witch's Guardian.

The blue knight's entire body seemed to be being eaten alive by ghoulish symbols that looked like black arteries. It was as if Yuuma's right of command over her Guardian was being stripped from her by force— Kojou and Yukina were dumbfounded, their voices shaking.

"Yuuma?!"

"...It can't be...stealing a witch's Guardian...?"

Through enormous magical power and a blood bond more powerful than any spell, Aya Tokoyogi was interfering with Yuuma's Guardian...and neither Kojou nor Yukina had any way to stop it.

If Kojou attacked Aya Tokoyogi with his Beast Vassal, or Yukina with her spear, the damage would surely rebound upon Yuuma. Yet even with Yuuma moaning in agony before their very eyes, there was simply nothing they could do.

Yuuma pleaded in a feeble voice, "No...Mother... Stop...!"

The woman with eyes of fire simply gazed upon her with a cruel smile.

"I am taking back the power I lent to you...*daughter*."

Aya Tokoyogi raised her left hand. That instant, an ear-splitting sound like that of a tree being snapped echoed around them; as Yuuma bent backward, something was torn right out of her— "Nooooooooooooooooooooo!"

The magical energy that flowed from her severed spiritual pathways gushed out like fresh blood.

The blue armor of Yuuma's guardian was now completely dyed in black.

The faceless knight roared like a beast released from its chain. Its form wavered like a mirage as it moved behind Aya Tokoyogi. She had completely stolen Yuuma's Guardian from her.

"*Yuuma!*" Kojou cried.

Yuuma's body rolled across the ground, discarded like a broken doll. When Kojou picked up her fallen, limp form, his breath caught in shock. She might have been barely breathing, but Yuuma's open eyes were completely unfocused. The way she quivered like a frightened, powerless child was completely unlike the Yuuma that Kojou knew.

Yukina raised her spear in visible anger.

“How...could you...!”

Its silver tip was pointed straight at Aya Tokoyogi, who was calmly looking down at them from her position atop the prison gate.

To a witch like Yuuma, a Guardian was no mere familiar or weapon; it was what a devil granted in exchange for the soul. In exchange for abandoning one's humanity, it became a part of one's own flesh and blood.

And yet, Aya Tokoyogi had stolen even this from Yuuma. She apparently held not even a single shred of affection for her own daughter, whom she regarded as nothing more than a tool for her own escape.

The fire-eyed woman had what seemed to be serious doubt upon her face.

“Fourth Primogenitor, Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency...of what do you take offense? That girl is a doll of my own...creation. Am I not free to make use of her as I please?”

Kojou clenched his teeth and seethed behind them, seized by anger that made it seem like every drop of blood in his body was flowing backward. He seemed to burn with an incredible surge of demonic energy that accompanied the hostility emanating from within him.



“...Don’t toy with me...!” Kojou growled.

The flame-like magical energy gushing from him shimmered and took the shape of a giant shadow. One of the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals was awakening in response to Kojou’s rage.

“You put my friend through somethin’ like this, and that’s all you have to say...?!”

“...!”

Bathed by Kojou’s tempest of magical energy, Aya Tokoyogi’s eyebrows twitched. The might of the Fourth Primogenitor’s demonic power disturbed even her calm composure.

However, before the Beast Vassal fully materialized, Kojou’s body suddenly swayed—and heavily. Dizziness assailed him as he fell to his knees; he coughed violently, spitting blood. Strength drained from his entire body, undermining the anger that welled within him.

As Kojou pressed his right hand to his chest, fresh blood turned to mist and streamed out. The bleeding coincided with what seemed like the collapse of his very power as a vampire.

Yukina’s face went pale as she realized Kojou was moaning in pain.

“Senpai?!”

Yukina was the one who’d inflicted that wound upon Kojou. She’d impaled Kojou with Snowdrift Wolf to take it back from Yuuma’s control: the purifying spear that could nullify any magical energy and was said to be capable of destroying even a vampiric primogenitor—

When she realized why Kojou was in poor shape, Aya casually murmured, without any hint of gloating, “I see. You’ve been wounded by the Schneewaltzer, Fourth Primogenitor.”

Then her narrowed eyes of flame turned toward Yukina in delight.

“So the cunning raccoons of the Lion King Agency finally found a wielder for that...spear. I think my treatment of my daughter was quite kind compared to yours.”

“?!”

Yukina’s face stiffened as Aya’s words echoed like a curse.

Yuuma had been born to be a tool for her mother’s escape from the prison, while Yukina was raised to be a Sword Shaman from a young age regardless of her will—certainly there were similarities between the two. In the sense that neither of them were given a choice in the matter, Aya Tokoyogi and the agency were not so far apart.

However, she felt something even more malignant nestled in the words Aya had used. That Snowdrift Wolf had not been granted to Yukina; rather, Yukina had been acquired for Snowdrift Wolf—

That was what it sounded like—as if the witch were mocking her.

Kojou, his instincts telling him he couldn’t let Yukina listen to the witch’s deceitful words, forced himself to his feet.

“...Shut...up already!”

Pale lightning was arcing from his blood-drenched right hand. It was an electrical attack from Regulus Aurum, one of the three Beast Vassals that Kojou had barely managed to tame.

The wound in his chest was still open. Even if he could summon a Beast Vassal in this state, there was no guarantee he could control it. However, Kojou had no other way to stop Aya Tokoyogi as he was now.

Aya was a powerful witch with enough raw power to rip Yuuma’s Guardian right out of her. He doubted half measures stood any chance of defeating her.

But as if to mock the ferocious hardening of his resolve, Aya pointed to that upon which she stood as she crafted a taunting smile.

“Are you certain, Fourth Primogenitor? Certainly, it would be easy for your power to dispatch me, but the prison barrier would not escape unscathed. No doubt the caster who controls the barrier would pay a commensurate price?”

“...You mean Natsuki?!”

Kojou lurched to his knees once more as he gazed up at the steel fortress behind Aya.

He still didn't know where Natsuki was. However, the fact that the prison barrier, a creation of her own spell, continued to exist, was proof that Natsuki was alive somewhere.

With the prison barrier used as a shield against him, Kojou was out of cards to play. Kojou's Beast Vassals were simply too strong to attack Aya without inflicting damage upon the prison.

An amused smirk came over Aya Tokoyogi as she looked behind her. "— Though, there are those who would be pleased by such an outcome."

That was the first time Kojou noticed that Aya Tokoyogi was *not* the only one looking down at him from above.

There were a number of unfamiliar faces on top of the prison barrier building.

The unmoved way they looked down at Kojou and the rest made it feel like they were gazing at worms.

Without thinking, Kojou's body stiffened and a deep chill zipped through him.

"Who the hell are those guys?!"

There were six figures atop the black fortress. One was an old man; one was a woman; one, a man in armor; one, a gentlemanly type wearing a silk hat. One was a teenager small in stature; the last was a slender-looking young man. Their ages and outfits held nothing in common, nor was there anything particularly repulsive about their outward appearances. But somehow, that was even more frightening.

Yukina regripped her spear, as if to defy the ghastly atmosphere. "They couldn't be..."

Kojou immediately understood what Yukina *hadn't* said.

There was no way Aya Tokoyogi had been the only one imprisoned in this giant barrier. If Aya Tokoyogi could break out, there was no reason others couldn't do so as well.

These were the most fiendish of sorcerous criminals, whom all normal means had failed to quell...

As he shielded the wounded Yuuma, Kojou grimaced. "This is...the worst case,

ain't it...?"

The pain of his chest wound intensified. The blood flowing out drenched his shirt.

2

The first one to speak was the gentleman wearing the silk hat.

"Aya Tokoyogi...the Witch of the Notaria, yes? First, let me thank you for prying open that abominable barrier."

He seemed around forty years old, give or take, and rather solidly built, too. But he gave off a gentle, intellectual air—perhaps it was the clothes making the man. He wouldn't have seemed out of place among the customers in a high-class salon or the guests at an opera house.

However—

Vivid, manifest hostility emanated from his entire body. His eyes burned with hatred for Kojou and the others concerned over Natsuki Minamiya's well-being.

To the inmates in the prison barrier, they were comrades of the Witch of the Void, the one who had captured them and sealed them in another world; the prisoners' wrath was surely great enough that ripping these interlopers limb from limb didn't seem quite sufficient.

Bathed in the jailbreakers' bloodlust, Aya looked back at them and asked quite calmly, "Only six of you... What happened to the others?"

The small young man atop the wall replied to Aya's question crudely:

"Nothin' happened! Just look at this bastard!"

His hair was short dreadlocks, and he wore one lavishly covered shirt over another, paired with baggy jeans. It was behind-the-times street fashion, but by his outward appearance, he seemed no older than Kojou or the others.

But he, too, was indeed one of the fiendish criminals held in the prison barrier. The proof of this was that, even at that moment, a gray metallic manacle covered his left forearm.

The young man with dreadlocks shouted fiercely as his right arm lashed out.

“Look!”

Kojou couldn’t comprehend what happened at the very next moment. What he *did* comprehend was the explosive blood spatter that flew from the body of the gentleman who stood in front of the youth.

“Schtola D, why you—!”

The gentleman coughed up blood as he turned to the offender, pelting him with a look filled with ire.

Based on his outfit and the air about him, Kojou guessed the older man was a sorcerer; furthermore, a sorcerous criminal who’d committed crimes so grave that he’d been stuffed into the prison barrier. No half-baked attack could have penetrated the powerful magical wall that protected his physical flesh. That was precisely why such arch criminals were sealed in another world to begin with.

But the younger man’s attack had sliced through his defenses like they were paper; the gentleman’s defenseless body had suffered grave, near-fatal injuries. His front had been split open from his shoulder all the way down to his belly. He fell to his knees on the spot, unable to fight back.

“Ha-ha—! Don’t hate me, sorcerer, hate that fragile body of yours!” shouted his adversary excitedly. “...And here it comes!”

The manacle encasing the young sorcerer’s left forearm began to glow. Countless chains gushed out of the gray manacle like a waterfall, relentlessly wrapping around the critically injured body and dragging it into the air. Its destination was no doubt the prison barrier’s interior.

The wounded man desperately tried to resist.

“Guoooooooooh—!”

However, he no longer had the power to weave a spell that could slice through the chains. He was swallowed by the air itself, as if he were sinking into a bottomless swamp. And then, he vanished.

“...Ah. The prison barrier system is still...functioning,” Aya remarked.

Neither she nor the other jailbreakers registered a single shred of emotion

toward the sorcerer's disappearance. Naturally, they felt no anger about the dreadlocked youth's attack, either. They'd just happened to be held in the same prison; they shared not the smallest particle of camaraderie.

The one called Schtola D merely replied with a dark grin.

"Looks like we won't be fully free until we kill the Witch of the Void and the prison barrier's completely gone," a young, violet-haired woman said to Aya, picking up where the dreadlocked youth left off. "*Tee-hee*...if you know, would you tell us where she is? A fellow witch like you should have a clue or two, yes?"

She was a beautiful woman with a decadent air about her, giving off a sense of corrupt sexuality. She wore very exposing lingerie under a long coat; somehow, she had the air of an old-fashioned harlot.

But the eyes with which she looked at Aya Tokoyogi were dyed with lurid bloodlust. Aya calmly brushed the hostility aside and slowly shook her head.

"Unfortunately, I know not. If you wish to kill that woman, by all means, search for her yourselves."

Schtola D curled up his lips in a militant smile. "That so. Sounds interestin', Miss LCO Leader. In that case, no use for you now, either."

He glared at Aya and raised his right hand in the same way he had when attacking the gentleman in the silk hat. Clearly, if Aya wouldn't cooperate, he'd kill her, too. He probably regarded any human being who wasn't of use to him as his enemy.

But the little witch had a listless look as she, too, raised her left arm before Schtola D, her long sleeve wrapped around it. She was holding an old tome.

"Do not be hasty, brash one... I know not Natsuki Minamiya's location, but I did not refuse to assist you."

Schtola D stopped moving, leaving his arm up. "Ahh?"

He seemed thrown off, unable to grasp the meaning of Aya's words.

In Schtola D's place, a slender-looking young man nodded, eyes narrowed in scrutiny. "Grimoire No. 014...*Personal History*, yes? I see...very interesting."

“Whaddaya mean, Meiga?”

The young man called Meiga retouched his glasses in apparent displeasure as he glanced over at Shtola D.

“I would rather you did not address me so casually...but ah well. Bottom line: It’s a curse. Aya Tokoyogi used the power of the grimoire to put a curse on the Witch of the Void. Natsuki Minamiya probably has amnesia this very moment... is that not so, Aya Tokoyogi?”

“That is...correct. Put more precisely, I have not stolen her memories alone, but the time she experienced.”

“Robbing another’s flesh and blood of accumulated time...so that is the ability of the grimoire permitted to LCO’s leader alone,” replied the young man thoughtfully. “I see...most fascinating...”

Shtola D snorted as he butted in.

“Stealin’ her memory and her time...so, what the hell does that actually *mean*?”

A cruel smile came over Meiga’s lips. “It means Natsuki Minamiya cannot currently use magic. She probably cannot employ her Guardian’s power, either.”

Natsuki Minamiya was a witch who could freely manipulate space. The terrible price of that pact was being the warden of the prison barrier, yet precisely because of that cost, she had been granted enormous magical power far surpassing the norm. And her ten-plus years of combat experience against demons had honed her into a cunning Attack Mage. No doubt all the prison barrier inmates were well aware of how frightening she could be.

But Aya Tokoyogi’s grimoire had robbed the source of Natsuki’s power from her.

Finally grasping the situation, Shtola D twisted his lips in obvious delight.

“That so? The grimoire took her power... No, it took the *time* and *experience* she needed to get that power, then...”

Aya Tokoyogi stroked the pages of her beloved grimoire as she spoke to

herself. “It took a plan ten years in the making, using my own daughter’s body as a decoy, to finally get the Witch of the Void to lower her guard for a single moment for one...blow. But that was sufficient to activate my...grimoire.”

Aya was well aware that there could be no escape from the prison barrier unless Natsuki Minamiya was defeated.

That was why she’d waited for Natsuki to reveal a single moment of weakness, giving her the time to play her trump card: the effect of her grimoire.

“It seems Natsuki Minamiya fled just before completely losing her magical energy,” the young man in glasses agreed in a cool, collected tone, “but she will be unable to use magic again for as long as the grimoire remains active. Meaning all one of us has to do is find her while she’s on the run and deliver the final blow. And you, Aya Tokoyogi?”

Aya said nothing. Her posture said, *Do as you wish*.

The woman with violet hair looked at the manacle on her left forearm and made a coquettish laugh. “If that’s how it is, you should lend us a hand, Aya Tokoyogi. All of us here want to kill her—Or perhaps, the first one to get to her wins?”

Schtola D, meanwhile, sulked as he ran a hand up his dreadlocks. “Keh, what a pain in the ass, but fine. My body’s gone soft from all that prison life. I bet this’ll be some real good rehab.”

The other jailbreakers nodded silently, apparently in agreement.

They’d search for the fleeing Natsuki and eliminate her. It seemed that the consensus among the jailbreakers was that they were on the same side, if only until then.

Natsuki’s magic was still sealed by Aya Tokoyogi. Even if she’d fled before losing her power, she surely hadn’t gone far. Natsuki was most likely somewhere on Itogami Island. If the escapees all went looking for her, finding her was most likely a matter of time.

In her present amnesiac state, Natsuki had already been pushed nearly to the brink. She couldn’t have been in any state to fight off the convicts.

You've gotta be kiddin' me, thought Kojou, his lips pursed as he stepped forward. He left the blood-drenched Yuuma to Yukina and glared up at the magical beings.

"Hold on. You think we're gonna just let you go after hearin' all that?"

Schtola D, as if finally remembering that Kojou even existed, shot him a look of annoyance. "Ah? Did the brat just say somethin'...?"

Even as he covered his chest wound, Kojou never took his eyes from them.

The prison barrier hadn't been completely broken. It was still possible to seal them away once more. But if they were to do so, they had to protect Natsuki, now on the run. They couldn't let the escapees catch up with her.

The young man in glasses nodded calmly. "Ah yes, you were here, too, Fourth Primogenitor. Perhaps we should dispose of you first..."

The woman in the coat narrowed her beautiful eyes as she glared at Kojou.

The man in armor moved his hand to the sword at his back without a word. The old man, too, spread his seemingly shriveled arms wide as he smiled.

Not a single one of them feared Kojou. They believed, as a matter of course, that they would win, even against the World's Mightiest Vampire.

Even so, Kojou had his own reason why he had to stop them. After all, it was the demonic power of the Fourth Primogenitor that had been used to break the prison barrier to begin with. Kojou couldn't help but feel responsible for that, all the more so now that he knew just what price Natsuki had paid to protect the prison barrier's seal.

Schtola D spoke with scorn as he leaped down off the tower.

"Geez...d'ya really think a *mere* primogenitor is gonna stop *me*?"

It was over ten meters between him and Kojou. A bare-handed attack wouldn't possibly reach.

Regardless, Schtola D swung his right arm down from well above.

Kojou felt the release of ferocious bloodlust but very little magical energy from Schtola D's right arm. Judging that it was a mere bluff, Kojou made no

move to evade. But—

“—No, senpai!” cried out Yukina, her expression frantic as she threw herself in front of Kojou as a shield.

A moment later, a gust of wind so powerful that the earth roared and quivered slammed down onto Yukina. The silver spear she carried took the gale Shtola D had unleashed straight on.

A metallic roar echoed off the weapon, as if a maul had swung down upon it. Yukina dropped to her knees from an incredible, unseen weight.

“Himeragi?!” Kojou yelled, as the aftereffects of the shock wave thrust past her and hit him, too.

It was an invisible slicing attack that could attack opponents over ten meters away. This seemed to be the ability of the young man called Shtola D. The gentleman sorcerer from earlier had probably been gravely wounded by the same technique.

However, what surprised Kojou was the fact Yukina had been unable to fully block his attack. Her spear should have been able to nullify any magical power in existence. So, Shtola D’s attack was able to breach even Snowdrift Wolf’s defense...

But the sorcerer above was just as shaken as they were.

“...What is that spear? It stopped my Thunder Ax?!”

His face seemed to scream, *How dare a powerless little girl like that stop my one-hit-one-kill attack!*

Shtola D howled as he raised his arm once more. “Now you’ve done it. You’ve hurt my pride, dammit! How ’bout I get a li’l serious, then?!”

The incredible bloodlust, far beyond that of before, told them what he was whipping up.

Yukina leaned on her spear as she rose. She looked to be at the end of her rope. “Senpai...leave this to me. Please take Yuuma and run.”

For an instant, Kojou was in shock. Shtola D represented such a menace by himself, but he was only one of the jailbreakers present.

They didn't know what the others could do, Aya Tokoyogi included. No matter how excellent of an Attack Mage Yukina was, Kojou didn't think she could defeat them all unscathed. On top of that, Yukina was worn down from fighting the LCO witches and Yuuma. He wasn't the only one still injured.

"No, Yukina! If someone's stayin' behind, it's gonna be—"

"No, senpai. You mustn't use your Beast Vassals in a place like this."

Kojou had nothing he could say in reply to that calm, composed rebuttal.

His Beast Vassals were too strong; they'd destroy the prison barrier entirely, even if all they were going after was one sorcerer. Furthermore, his unstable condition made merely controlling the Beast Vassals a chancy thing.

Yukina turned her back to Kojou. "I will buy you time until you can escape. Please take Yuuma and go!"

"Himeragi!"

"Please hurry. Or do you intend to let Yuuma and Ms. Minamiya die?!"

"That doesn't mean I can just leave you!" Kojou yelled back without thinking.

The way Yukina had calmly decided that it was only natural that she should sacrifice herself *really* pissed him off.

Yukina's eyes widened and she froze, as if Kojou's reaction had truly surprised her.

It looked at first like Kojou was just being stubborn, but his cheeks were red, like he was blushing a bit. For a single instant, the two silently traded stares—

But it was at the very next moment that Schtola D laid eyes on Kojou and Yukina and slammed another invisible slice down toward them.

"Ha-ha! I'll squish ya' like a bug, Fourth Primogenitor—!"

Kojou and Yukina reacted too slowly to dodge Schtola D's attack. Then—

As the two held their breath, a dazzling crimson beam filled their fields of vision.

The explosion that poured down near Kojou left his eardrums numb. He wavered unsteadily as the earth rippled.

The resulting crater in the ground largely caved in, kicking up enough dust to completely obstruct his vision. Debris blown into the air poured down to the surface like hail.

However, Schtola D's attack was not the cause of this. As proof, he too gaped with a dumbfounded expression as debris rained down around him.

"What the hell was *that*?!"

Schtola D lamented as he gazed up at the red evening sky. A giant mass of flame had flown out of thin air to disrupt his attack. It was an attack spell from long range.

He must have thought it the work of another prisoner, but it was not so. In fact, the audience merely laughed coldly.

Of course, it had not been Kojou's doing, either. However, Kojou had some idea who'd unleashed the attack, for he had seen very similar magic before—magic with overwhelming destructive power that rivaled that of a vampire's Beast Vassal.

It was a black magic barrage created via a curse with an intensity far beyond that which human vocal cords and lungs could tolerate. It was a magic bullet fired by the Lion King Agency's area suppression weapon Der Freischütz.

"...I, Dancer of the Lion, Archer of the High God, beseech thee."

Kojou and Yukina heard a young woman's solemn chant from behind them. As the mountain of rubble blew apart, Sayaka Kirasaka emerged, a metal Western-style bow in hand.

Her hair, worn in a ponytail, fluttered as she stood within an unexpected choice of vehicle. It was a chariot reminiscent of those of the ancient steppe peoples, drawn by a giant warhorse. The display was so overwhelmingly nonsensical that even Schtola D ended up doing nothing but stare blankly.

"Most Brilliant Flaming Horse, Illustrious Kirin, He Who Governs Heavenly Thunder, pierce these evil spirits with thy wrath...!"

Seizing the opportunity, Sayaka completed her chant and unleashed her arrow toward the heavens.

The specially constructed whistling arrow sailed, releasing a monstrous sound that shrieked like a curse unleashed. The sound echoed until the arrow finally transformed into incandescent lightning, pouring over and over onto the escaped prisoners from above.

Giant explosions erupted across the prison barrier.

Sayaka had little hope of felling such opponents with an attack of that scale, but she trusted it would at least hide Kojou and the others from their sight. Shtola D raged at the intrusion into his battle, but only bits and pieces of his rant could be heard.

During that time, the chariot Sayaka rode violently rent the surface of the ground in front of Kojou and the others as it screeched to a halt.

“Yukina, get on! Oh, you too, Kojou Akatsuki!” the archer shouted with a tone that left no room for quibbling as she released more cursed arrows.

With a certain time lag, countless explosions descended upon the escaped prisoners, obstructing their pursuit.

Sayaka continued to breathe raggedly as Kojou looked up at her, hesitating on raw instinct.

“K-Kirasaka...?! Uh, are you sure about this...?”

Up close, the chariot was truly overwhelming. The warhorse’s head was covered in a steel helm, its hooves continuing to echo violently; the color of the carriage closely resembled that of a bloodstain. Metal spikes jutted out from the wheels, further adding to its ominous appearance. It clearly wasn’t something sane people should ride on.

However, it also represented their only means of escape.

“Senpai, we have to save Yuuma!” Yukina shouted, as she supported the wounded girl over her shoulder.

To hell with it, Kojou decided, half in despair, as he helped the girls aboard the bizarre chariot. Kojou himself followed, vaulting up the step to the

compartment. Sayaka violently snapped the reins the instant she saw him do so.

“*Nuaaaaa!!* I’m gonna fall, I’m gonna fall!”

Kojou let out a pathetic shriek at the unbelievably rough ride. One of the wheels rolled over a large piece of debris and jumped so violently that it threatened to shake Kojou right off the edge of the tilting chariot.

As he grabbed onto Sayaka from behind, she, too, let out a shriek as her body shuddered and froze.

“*Hya...?! Wh-where are you touching me?!*”

Even then, the chariot continued to accelerate; the cab shook with greater and greater vehemence.

Kojou excused himself shrilly:

“Well, there’s nothin’ else to grab on to!”

If he let go now, it was a virtual certainty he’d be thrown right off their ride.

Sayaka, who had both hands occupied with holding onto her bow, could do nothing to push Kojou away; all she could do was squirm.

“That doesn’t mean you can do this while Yukina’s watchi— Anyway, lower! If you’re gonna grab on, do it lo— NOT THAT LOW—!! D-don’t push your face into me—!”

“I’m not doin’ it on purpose! It’s the chariot’s fault for rockin’ too much! And why a chariot anyway?!”

“Someone left it on the side of the road, so I borrowed it! It’s not like I had any other way to get around!”

“The heck?! No one just leaves somethin’ like *this* lyin’ on the side of the road!”

“Well, someone did, so there!!”

With no sense of the gravity of the situation, Kojou and Sayaka continued yelling at each other atop the cramped, rocking chariot. Yukina looked up at both of them mildly, sighing.

Even with four people aboard, the warhorse drawing the chariot was galloping full speed ahead. It was a speed that seemed aberrant for a single animal.

The helmet covering the horse's head had the words COISTE BODHAR engraved upon its surface. Apparently, that was the warhorse's name. It was the name of the favorite coach of the Headless Horseman—the Dullahan—from a European myth hailing from the Middle Ages.

Just as Kojou recalled that fact, he heard a loud *crack*.

The steel helm covering the warhorse's head split apart and fell onto the road, snapping the reins in Sayaka's grasp in the process.

Kojou, staring dumbfounded as the warhorse continued to gallop, gasped in terror.

“Th...the head's...?!”

That was just it: There *wasn't* a head under the warhorse's helmet. It was as if a great ax had lopped off everything from the neck up. A headless horse was drawing Sayaka's chariot.

“What's with this horse...?! Where the hell did you get this thing, anyway?!”

Yukina redirected his attention calmly, even as she continued to clutch the unconscious Yuuma. “Please calm down, senpai! This horse is probably a machine.”

Face turning pale, Sayaka herself looked back mechanically. “M-machine...?! It's a robot?!”

“Wait, *you* didn't notice, either?!” Kojou shouted at Sayaka, glaring.

“Well, you'd never expect a robot horse to be sitting on the side of the road,” fumed Sayaka, excusing herself with puffed-up cheeks.

Yukina sighed, resigned. “It is most likely for the Hollow Eve Festival parade...”

Kojou patted himself down with relief, finally recovering his state of mind. “Parade... R-right... For the parade...”

The Hollow Eve Festival, in progress and much beloved, was a Demon

Sanctuary event modeled after Halloween. The city was decked out in ghost and monster designs with large numbers of costumed tourists taking part.

There were nighttime parades with big floats and lots of ornate lighting. This headless horse chariot must've been one of the floats.

Given that you couldn't tell it wasn't a real horse except for the lack of a head, it might've been some kind of publicity thing by a Demon Sanctuary corporation wanting to show off its technology. Apparently, Sayaka had absconded with it without any idea about that.

Man she really stirs things up. Kojou couldn't help but think; facts were facts: The chariot had saved their lives. A normal car or motorcycle would never have been able to get them off that rubble-covered, man-made island.

Sayaka twisted her lips into a pout and knitted her brows like she'd only just remembered something. "Incidentally, Kojou Akatsuki... You're back in your own body now?"

Now that Kojou thought about it, he had been body swapped with Yuuma the last time he'd met Sayaka.

Kojou bit his lip, mortified, as he checked back on Yuuma, who was lying on her side at the bottom of the carriage. "Yeah, somehow. But thanks to that, she's..."

The blood-drenched Yuuma's eyes remained open, but she showed no signs of moving. Her breathing seemed irregular and uncertain; her body temperature had dropped considerably. The exhaustion of her body ran deeper than the visible wounds. This was the state getting her Guardian ripped right out of her had left her in.

"...Wasn't she an LCO criminal or something?" Sayaka asked hesitantly, as she, too, glanced at Yuuma.

Kojou shook his head. "She was just bein' used... By her own mom, even."

"Mom? What do you mean?"

"This Aya Tokoyogi chick. She was locked up in the prison barrier. She's a witch, and she stabbed Natsuki through Yuuma. Aw, crap, if we don't find

Natsuki, we are so screwed...”

“Eh? Eh? Natsuki, you mean Natsuki Minamiya...? Someone stabbed the Witch of the Void?”

Kojou’s awkward explanation had only thrown Sayaka into greater confusion. Yukina looked conflicted as she was forced to intervene:

“Aya Tokoyogi is a criminal imprisoned in the prison ward. She is considered the leader of LCO.”

“LCO’s Great Librarian...? And that’s her mom...?!”

“Yes. She used Yuuma’s witch pact to break herself out of prison.”

“And she did this to her own daughter once her usefulness was over?! What a —!”

Sayaka’s lips pursed as she finally understood. She glared angrily at the steel-colored fortress far behind them.

Yukina lowered her eyes and quietly explained, “Escaped prisoners are after Ms. Minamiya to put an end to the prison barrier. We have to secure her before that happens, but...we cannot abandon Yuuma, either...”

Sayaka sighed gravely. “Well, that’s not good... She might not last long at this rate.”

“Can’t you do somethin’, Kirasaka?” Kojou pleaded to Sayaka. “You know, like you did before...?”

Once before, Sayaka had performed first aid on the gravely wounded Astarte and saved her life.

However, a pained expression came over their driver as she shook her head slightly.

“Don’t be absurd. That time I stopped the blood loss, but repairing yanked-out spiritual pathways is way beyond what I can do. Without a powerful witch or a sorcerous physician...”

Kojou lifted his head as he repeated Sayaka’s words to himself.

“A sorcerous physician...huh...?”

The chariot Kojou and the others were riding in had already left the harbor district and entered the city proper. It was Island South—the research and development district covered with corporate and academic facilities. The lack of pedestrians was no doubt due mostly to employees being off on holiday for the duration of the Hollow Eve Festival.

They could no longer see the prison barrier floating atop the inlet. It seemed that Shtola D and the others had no intention of pursuing them farther.

Having confirmed this for himself, Kojou spoke with determination. “Kirasaka. Stop at the next set of lights, would you?”

“Er...why?” Sayaka replied dubiously.

“I think I know someone who can treat Yuuma... Should be at that white building up ahead there.”

“Th-that so?” Sayaka replied as cold sweat trickled down her brow. “But, um... stopping this thing... How, exactly?”

She timidly presented her hands with what little remained of the torn-off reins in them.

A properly trained horse could be stopped with only a light pull of the reins. However, Coiste Bodhar, the warhorse drawing the chariot, had no head, so of course there was no bridle to attach any reins to.

Kojou went pale when he grasped the implications.

“Wh-wh-what are you gonna do?! How are you gonna stop this horse?!”

“D-don’t ask me, I have no idea...!”

“This ain’t the time to argue—!”

Apparently, the horse had been running amok since the moment the helmet had come off. Now beyond Sayaka’s control, the chariot ferociously hurtled toward the research and development district.

Shocked expressions came over the pedestrians and drivers of oncoming vehicles as they noticed the chariot led by a headless horse, but Kojou and the others had no room to spare them any concern.

Their ride plunged toward an intersection with a red light, wherein it swerved at the last minute of its own accord to narrowly avoid a head-on collision. The sudden turn pulled the chariot well off the road, and sparks violently scattered from its wheels. The carriage grazed the raised pedestrian walkway, pieces of it scattering while taking a bite out of the asphalt.

Kojou was clinging to Sayaka's hips once more.

"Whoa! That was close! Ain't there an emergency brake on this thing?!"

Yukina was desperately holding down the unconscious Yuuma so that she wouldn't get thrown off.

"This might be...bad...," muttered Sayaka.

"Wha...?!"

Kojou's eyes bulged as he noticed the concrete wall standing right in their path. It was a solid enclosure surrounding a corporate laboratory, completely blocking the chariot's path.

Without a way to bring the chariot back under control, they had no means to avoid crashing into it.

"Sayaka, Lustrous Scale! Cut the horse loose—!"

"Wh-why am I taking orders from you...?!"

Sayaka's mouth complained, but she swung down her beloved sword—Der Freischütz in sword mode—just as Kojou told her to.

The silver blade descended and easily severed the shaft connecting the headless horse to the carriage. The warhorse, released from the heavy carriage, accelerated with great force and agilely leaped over the looming perimeter wall.

On the other hand, the chariot Kojou and the others were riding pitched forward and made contact with the ground. It slid sideways while losing speed, stopping at about a ninety-degree angle. The distinct wheel tracks left on the ground spewed white, putrid smoke.

Kojou gave a shaky sigh of relief as he gazed at the perimeter wall they'd barely avoided crashing into. One false move and they'd have been in a major

accident. He wasn't sure if Sayaka had saved them, or nearly gotten them all killed, or both.

That said, when he looked at Sayaka and saw how utterly exhausted she was, he was in no mood to criticize her. She'd been engaged in combat with LCO witches right before having come to save them, firing Der Freischütz in rapid succession to save them from grave danger. He ought to have been thanking her, not whining.

Kojou extricated himself from the toppled carriage and looked up at the building towering before them. "...Well, at least we got here in one piece."

It was a giant laboratory complex composed of several buildings. All the walls were white, somehow invoking the feel of a hospital.

Yukina suddenly lifted her head and asked, "This wouldn't be...the MAR lab, would it...?"

MAR—Magna Ataraxia Research Incorporated—was a giant conglomerate with branches all over the Far East. It was a corporate group formed of a number of sorcerous product manufacturers with global reach.

"Yeah. There's a guesthouse for visitors in the central building. C'mon."

Kojou picked up the sleeping Yuuma and walked through the laboratory's front gate. Yukina followed behind him without a word. Sayaka, now left all alone, hurried to catch up.

"Kojou Akatsuki. How do you know something like that?" she demanded.

Kojou grimaced.

"If she hasn't been back home, she's probably still here..."

Sayaka blinked curiously and inclined her head slightly. "Who?"

For some reason, Kojou looked a bit conflicted as he scratched his cheek, looking back at Sayaka.

"Mimori Akatsuki. My mother."

With night fallen, tourists packed the streets. Floats adorned with countless tiny lights and a myriad of dancers paraded by as well. It was the first night of the Hollow Eve Festival, and the famous Night Parade had begun.

Asagi Aiba heaved a deep sigh as she gazed at the glittering spectacle via a large window.

She was sitting in a booth at a family restaurant. Across from her was a little girl in a lovely one-piece dress, with a big ribbon on her head. She sat in a chair that seemed to be just the right height for her.

It was about this time that the waitress delivered their meals. "Thank you for waiting. Here is your limited-time-only Brilliant Hollow Eve Hamburger Plate with large rice and a kids' pancake combo."

The serving woman was dressed in a Halloween-style outfit as she carried full plates in both hands.

The little girl with the ribbon fidgeted to the slightest degree as she looked up at the food being brought over.

"Please enjoy!"

As the ribbon-wearing girl watched the waitress make her pleasant remark and leave, she looked at Asagi with upturned eyes, apparently gauging by Asagi's reaction whether it was okay to dig in.

Asagi made a slightly pained smile as she handed the girl a knife and fork.

The girl with the ribbon accepted these and began slicing up her pancakes with little regard for safety. Her small mouth opened as wide as it could to accommodate the pancakes drenched in syrup and butter.

"Delicious?" Asagi couldn't keep a smile off her face as she asked.

The young girl nodded, her cheeks puffed up like she was some kind of squirrel.

Asagi sighed deeply before she spoke. "Ah. That's good."

It made her wonder all over again: *How did things end up like this?*

She'd been minding her own business the day before the Hollow Eve Festival

when she'd been abruptly called by the Gigafloat Management Corporation, spending all night dealing with trouble that culminated in the roof of their own office building getting taken over by criminals and herself getting pinned down inside. Then, just as she thought the incident had finally been dealt with, a mysterious little girl appeared and glommed on to her—which was where things still stood.

She thought it was too much misfortune even for her.

Asagi figured that while she was suffering like this, Kojou, that transfer student, and his beautiful childhood friend were having the time of their lives at the festival. Just picturing it made her sick to her stomach.

The ribbon-wearing girl spoke in monotone as she looked up at Asagi with concern.

“Mama...are you upset?”

Asagi gasped and regained her senses.

“Eh? Ahh no, not at all. It's not like that at all... I'm just thinking about something.”

She smiled more than she was accustomed to and shook her head. She realized she had to take the little girl's feelings into account. After all, the girl was going through a much harder time than Asagi was. Seeing Asagi lost in thought had no doubt unsettled the girl.

The young woman lowered her eyes to the same level as the little girl's as she gently asked, “Hey, do you remember anything now? Like, maybe your name?”

But her dinner partner only shook her head in silence.

Asagi had asked the same question several times over by this point, but the girl had been unable to state her own name or where she lived. She looked plenty intelligent enough, so surely it wasn't that she didn't understand the question. Perhaps she'd lost her memory.

Asagi pressed forward with her next question.

“Do you remember your mom's name?”

This time, the reply was immediate.

“Asagi Aiba!”

“How did it end up like this...?”

Asagi deflated like a balloon and began munching on her food.

For a single moment, she thought about the possibility that the young girl really was her own daughter, perhaps a girl Asagi had given birth to in the future who’d somehow traveled back in time.

Er, no, definitely not. She couldn’t grasp what the point would be to send a young girl like this into the past by herself, and in the first place, she couldn’t be Asagi’s daughter; she didn’t look anything like Asagi or Kojou. *Wait, this has nothing to do with Kojou!*

Asagi’s thoughts descended into a hazy loop.

“Oh, okay. That’s why I got that déjà vu feeling...”

As Asagi watched the little girl stuff her cheeks with pancakes, she finally realized who the girl resembled. The girl with the ribbon in her hair looked just like her homeroom teacher, Natsuki Minamiya. Frilly dress, check; long hair, check; doll-like face, check—she’d seen it all before.

Without realizing, Asagi lowered her voice to a whisper. “Hey, does the name Natsuki Minamiya ring a bell? Maybe that’s the name of your real mother...”

Upon meeting Natsuki Minamiya for the first time, virtually everyone pegged her for a grade schooler, but she claimed to be twenty-six years old even so. At that age, she could well have given birth to a daughter some four or five years old.

If the little girl with the ribbon really was Natsuki’s daughter, it was certainly possible she knew Asagi’s face from class photos or other bits of data. That would be one explanation for how the girl had latched on to Asagi.

But the girl with the ribbon stopped eating as she murmured with some difficulty, “Natsuki...Minamiya...”

She stared at Asagi with big eyes, her emotions unreadable. Suddenly, her eyes wavered greatly as clear teardrops poured from them. The large flow of tears made an audible sound as they fell upon the table. The sight made Asagi

lose her nerve in a hurry.

“W-wait a... What’s wrong...?”

The girl with the ribbon gently shook her head. “I don’t know...”

Asagi could not sense any echo of sadness in the girl’s voice. The girl herself didn’t seem to have any idea why she was crying.

But with this, Asagi could firmly state the possibility was exceptionally high that the ribbon-wearing girl was related to Natsuki Minamiya. That meant Asagi was no disinterested observer. Apparently, it was her unavoidable fate to look after the girl.

“Aww, man.”

Guess I’ve gotta do it, Asagi thought, sighing out of pure stubbornness as she grabbed several napkins. She reached out to the ribbon-wearing girl’s cheeks and wiped her tears away.

“Okay, got it. This is what we’ll do. From this moment on, your name is Sana.”

“Sana?”

“Right. It’s your nickname until you can remember your real name. It gets rough if I don’t have anything to call you, see.”

The girl blinked, confused, while she listened to Asagi’s plan. But then, finally, her cheeks glowed brightly as a charming little smile came over her lips.

“Sana...that’s my name...”

A broad grin came over Asagi as she saw for herself that “Sana” was happy with the moniker.

“Yeah.”

She looked just like a smaller version of Natsuki, so Asagi had based the nickname off “Small Natsuki”; luckily, the girl apparently liked it.

That being said, it did nothing to resolve the underlying problems facing them.

With Sana unable to remember her own name, there was no way Asagi could just bring the girl to her place. The police’s Missing Children’s Center was

already in a state of panic, so she couldn't rely on them for a quick resolution, either.

She could try to use Mogwai, but even Asagi hesitated to use Itogami Island's main computer system just to find the mother of a missing child.

What to do? Asagi wondered in anguish as she stuffed a hamburger combo down her throat. But that was when she realized Sana was looking out the window every so often.

"...Sana?"

The girl was looking at a section of the parade on the side of the road; she seemed especially taken in by the people dancing in animal mascot costumes on top of a particular float.

"Interested in the parade?"

Asagi's question made Sana's shoulders quiver. She looked like a frightened kitten as she shifted her gaze to Asagi and made a small nod. Sana's behavior brought a strained smile to Asagi's face.

"Wanna go?"

The instant she asked, Sana's expression glittered brightly. She quickly began finishing off her pancakes so that they could leave as soon as possible.

Asagi's shoulders slumped as she watched the innocent, beaming smile that matched the girl's age.

"Well...she certainly is cute..."

Asagi's very long day seemed set to continue for a while longer.

5

Due to the sheer size of the MAR lab site, the countless buildings connected to one another formed a giant three-dimensional complex. Kojou headed straight in without the slightest hesitation while carrying Yuuma, who was fast asleep.

Finally, they arrived at a cylinder-shaped building in one corner of the

complex. The building was a series of extravagant, resort-style apartments.

Properly speaking, these were meant for hosting guests and researchers from off the island, but Kojou and Nagisa's mother, Mimori Akatsuki, had snagged one of them for her own personal use, sleeping there the vast majority of every week. Kojou thought that it posed a bit of a problem for a guardian to be doing this, but he couldn't complain very much, given the situation he was in now.

Pressing his hand to a palm-reader touch panel, Kojou opened the door to the guesthouse's living room. He entered to the familiar sight of its elegant lobby decorated with marble floors.

Sayaka's expression was rather stiff as she followed behind the others. "S-so, Kojou Akatsuki, your mother is here, then?"

Kojou affirmed this with a melancholic sigh.

"Our mother's the chief of research for MAR's Department of Medicine. She's a certified clinical pathologist of sorcery, and she's kind of an acquaintance of Yuuma's, too..."

Kojou scowled as he added, "I didn't wanna involve the woman in this if I could avoid it, though."

Kojou had not spoken to Mimori about the fact he'd become a vampire. He didn't want his mother to know his current circumstances, though the reason was completely separate from Nagisa's fear of demons.

There was no doubt whatsoever in Kojou's mind that, should he carelessly reveal to her he was a vampire, his mother would happily lock him away and examine his body down to the finest detail. Knowing her, she'd chop him up to see what made him tick. *You'll come back to life anyway so what's the big deal*, she'd say.

Kojou figured this wasn't the first of Sayaka's encounters with eccentricity, so there wasn't any point in telling her this.

But as Kojou ran such things through his mind, Sayaka was right behind him, squirming all around like she'd been backed into a corner.

"Wait a minute... I'm not emotionally prepared for this...!"

Kojou gave her a dubious look as they got into an elevator. "...What the heck are *you* all nervous for?"

Sayaka's cheeks blazed crimson as she returned in a shrill voice, "I ain't the least bit nervous at all here!!"

Kojou sighed a bit in exasperation. "Even your speech is getting all messed up."

The elevator Kojou and the others were on reached its destination. Yukina chose that moment to hesitantly ask, "Excuse me... But I wonder if we will be in the way?"

Yukina looked at a loss for words as she glanced down at her blue apron dress. Thanks to having engaged in ferocious combat, her clothes were a mess, dusty and scratched all over. Her silver-colored spear had been stained by blood spatter, too; it was a little much for a claim that it was just part of the Hollow Eve Festival costume. Any way you looked at it, these weren't clothes for being introduced to someone's mother. Yukina wouldn't have blamed the woman for calling the police on the spot.

However, for some reason, all Kojou did was give a faint, strained smile and remark, "Oh, is that all?"

"I don't think you need to worry," he added. "You'll understand as soon as you meet her, I think."

"R-right..."

Yukina and Sayaka remained somewhat bewildered, but Kojou paid them no heed as he rang the doorbell to the apartment that was now Mimori-occupied territory. With a small delay, a yawning voice drifted out of the intercom:

"Yes, yes, who might it be?"

"It's me, Mom. Sorry, I've got a favor to ask y—"

Kojou strove to keep his behavior as blunt as possible to avoid being dragged into his mother's overly easygoing pace. However, Mimori interrupted her son's lack of pleasantries with a buoyant tone.

"Ah, Kojou? Right, right, hold on, I'm opening the door now."

They sensed a hectic rush of footsteps approaching the other side of the door before she unlocked it. Seeing she had done so, Kojou opened the door.

In that instant, a giant jack-o'-lantern wearing a white robe leaped right out of the room. The pumpkin itself was over a meter in diameter; both of its eyes glowed as it thrust itself before the group's eyes.

"Boo!"

"Hyaaaaa?!"

Yukina and Sayaka, already tense for reasons unknown, shrieked on the spot from the shock. They clung to Kojou, one on each side of him, clutching their weapons all the while.

The jack-o'-lantern in the white robe gave off a satisfied laugh while watching the reaction. Soon, though, it pulled its pumpkin head off with a *plop*. A woman with a lovely face emerged from within.

Age-wise, she really appeared rather young, but that might have well been from her grinning expression completely lacking in tension. Or perhaps her looks were simply in line with her mental age—

Mimori Akatsuki proudly thrust her chest out as she asked, "Hmmm... Did I scare you?"

Kojou glared at his mother's display of pride with annoyance.

"Damn right you scared us! What are you tryin' to pull here, geez!"

"Well, it's the Hollow Eve Festival today! And I really wanted to go, too. Trick or die!"

Kojou's breathing was ragged as he yelled back at her:

"I think you got a few things wrong. That'd be one really scary festival!"

And this was why he didn't want to get the woman involved in all this. He just knew that this was going to happen.

For her part, Mimori noted that Yukina and Sayaka were now snuggled up against her son.

"Oh my, and you two would be...?"

An extremely pleased-looking leer came over her. She looked like a child who'd just gotten two brand-new toys to play with. As Mimori looked all over Yukina and Sayaka, rooted to the spot, and Yuuma, still in Kojou's arms, some thought must have come to mind as she rammed an elbow into Kojou's side, hard.



Kojou grunted in response.

“What do you think yer doin’, geez...?!”

Mimori ignored her son’s protests as she sunnily voiced her newfound admiration:

“They’re soooooo cute!”

And then, she whispered into Kojou’s ear, “Who are they? Which one’s your steady? Done her yet? Oh my, are you adding to the family? Am I going to be a grandmother in the near future?”

Feeling completely helpless under the assault, Kojou shouted at his mother, “I have not and I’m not gonna! Listen to people for once, dammit!”

Mimori’s cheeks puffed up in response, a sour note.

How can you act like that in your thirties? thought Kojou, all of this giving him a light headache. Yukina and Sayaka were in complete shock, holding perfectly still as if they were wooden statues.

Hearing the ruckus outside the front door, a small silhouette emerged from inside Mimori’s apartment. Her long hair and big eyes were rather distinctive.

“Huhhh? Kojou?”

“Eh...?!”

The unexpected encounter with his little sister left Kojou staring with his mouth open. She’d left their shared apartment without a word, and there’d been no contact between them in the time since; he had no idea what she was doing here or how long it had been.

“Nagisa? What are you doin’—when’d you get here?”

“Mimori called this morning and asked me to bring a change of clothes.” Nagisa, wearing a black cat outfit, replied like she had no idea why Kojou was surprised.

“So you’ve been here ever since?”

“That’s right. I’ve been cleaning the apartment and picking up clothes from dry cleaning. After that, cooking. If I just leave the apartment to Mimori, it’d get

into a really awful state, and her fridge was empty already...”

Kojou breathed a sigh of relief, even with his minor misgivings about Nagisa’s behavior. Nagisa going missing at the same time the prison barrier incident was heating up in earnest had gotten Kojou quite worried. He had no complaints as long as Nagisa was safe. Besides, he didn’t think she was lying to him.

“And what have you been up to, Kojou? You were with Yukina and them the whole time, right?”

Kojou and the others stiffened.

A smile came over Yukina that resembled a nervous tic; she nodded awkwardly. “G-good evening.”

“Wait, Yuu’s hurt?! What happened? Who’s that girl over there? Wait, I think I met her before somewhere...”

Nagisa’s eyes widened in surprise when she spotted Yuuma in Kojou’s arms, then glared at Sayaka. Her change in expression was almost dizzying as she launched a barrage of questions.

“Um... What is your exact relationship with Kojou?”

“Eh?! M-me?!” Sayaka fidgeted and averted her eyes as Nagisa strongly pressed the point.

Nagisa had previously seen Sayaka in the process of making a scene as she attacked Kojou at school. The fact that Asagi had been hurt in the ordeal had made about the worst impression possible on Nagisa.

Sayaka was virtually in tears as she looked back at Kojou, her eyes begging for rescue. In spite of her implicit plea, Kojou drew his face close and whispered into her ear, “Sorry, Sayaka. Hold Nagisa off for a while, would you?”

“Eh? Ehh?!”

Sayaka instantly raised her voice in protest as Kojou gruffly shoved her toward his sister. Nagisa silently grabbed her wrist and glared at her with a look that said, *You’re not getting away!*

“Wait a...! I—I will remember this, Kojou Akatsuki...!”

Ignoring Sayaka's cries of protest as Nagisa dragged her away, Kojou turned back toward his mother.

In contrast to Mimori's sunny disposition, Kojou seemed strangely exhausted. *Why does it have to be so hard just to talk to my own mother?* he wondered bitterly.

"...Could you do me a favor and take a look at Yuuma?"

"Hmmm? By Yuuma, you mean little Yuu? That brings me back. Oh, that's right, Yuu was a girl..."

Mimori leaned over and peered at Yuuma's face as Kojou continued to hold her. With the practiced hand of a clinical pathologist, she touched the skin of the injured girl; her eyes came to a stop over the wound in Yuuma's chest.

"What happened, Kojou?"

"I don't have time to talk about the specifics, but...Yuuma's actually..."

"—A witch?"

"So you really can tell."

Even as the ease of her correct guess astounded him, Kojou nodded gravely. He was honestly grateful that he didn't need to chew up time explaining.

"Well, I'll give her a look. Come on in!"

Kojou and the others entered the apartment with Mimori leading the way. Even when compared to the other high-class guest rooms, the suite Mimori occupied was in a class all its own.

Underwear, unopened letters, suspicious-looking medical instruments, and the like were randomly strewn all around the room, but Nagisa's determined efforts had kept the area around the sofa, at least, in comparatively decent shape.

Kojou laid Yuuma on that sofa when Mimori, now changed into a fresh white gown, came back in, putting on antiseptic gloves. She stood beside Yuuma as she slept, leaned over her, and began carefully examining the girl with a practiced hand.

“Considering the blood loss, her external injuries aren’t all that deep. The laceration to the chest didn’t reach the internal organs. Bending space to avert a fatal wound, perhaps...? Mmm...I can’t tell much more like this. Kojou, prop her up, would you?”

“Eh? Ah, sure.”

Kojou did as told and raised Yuuma’s torso to support it while she slept. As he did so, Mimori gently thrust her hands toward Yuuma’s breasts with some kind of thought in mind.

“There we go... Here, take this.”

With one smooth motion, Mimori pulled something off and tossed it in front of Yukina. As Yukina caught the white cloth and spread it out, she let out a flustered “wah!”

Mimori had pulled off Yuuma’s bra with some kind of stage magician’s trick.

“Wh-what are you doin’ out of the blue like that...?!” Kojou objected, swiftly turning his back away from Yukina’s hands.

However, Mimori calmly continued her examination without any outward indication of mischief.

“It was in the way of palpation so I got rid of it... Oh my, Yuu, I take my eyes off you for a little bit and look at how you’ve *grown*... As a physician, I simply cannot let this pass by...heh-heh.”

Mimori, wiping away the drool that for some reason had trickled from her lip, began fondling Yuuma’s breasts while she slept.

A spasm came over Yukina’s face as she watched this purely perverse behavior.

“Er... Madam, this is, ah...a patient, you know...” Looking up as Yukina tried to rebuke her, Mimori smiled pleasantly, as if her interest had been piqued.

“Oh my. You’re Yukina Himeragi, yes?”

“Ah...yes.”

Yukina immediately rectified her posture as Mimori’s scrutinizing gaze shifted

to her. Yukina's reaction made Mimori beam in an exceptionally good mood.

"Ah, I see. Oh, don't worry, I'm a medical psychometer, you see. I can examine most things just by making contact with the skin."

"...You mean...you're a Hyper-Adapter?"

Yukina sucked in her breath in surprise. "Hyper-Adapter" was a term used for natural psychics who did not rely upon magic. Defying any categorization, their abilities included numerous skills of great rarity, causing phenomena that could not be achieved through scientific technology or magic. No doubt the warm welcome Mimori had received at MAR was due in no small part to her special ability and not just her conventional talents.

Suddenly regaining her composure, Yukina asked a new question, her tone conveying that she just wasn't getting it.

"Erm...if all you need to do is touch the skin, you don't actually need to fondle her breasts, do you...?"

"Oh, that won't do at all!" announced Mimori with an exaggerated shake of her head.

"My ability only functions when I'm fondling the knockers of a pretty girl, so it can't be helped, you see."

"I-is that so?"

Yukina was on the verge of falling for it when Kojou angrily interjected.

"Of course, it ain't! There's no such thing as pervy psychometry like that! Geez, don't pull that stuff on people you've just met!!"

"Muu," went Mimori, her cheeks puffing up to pout.

"I want to touch her so what's the big deal? There's no point in being a sorcerer's physician if you can't touch the knockers of pretty girls! You think so, too, don't you?!"

A powerful feeling of fatigue assailed Kojou as he replied with a glare, "Keep me out of this! Take this seriously, you lecherous doc!"

Naturally, Yukina was in complete shock as well. Having said that, the fact

was, Mimori's frivolous behavior had greatly eased their tension. Strangely, they all seemed to have confidence that she could save Yuuma, even though she was almost at death's door.

Beside Yukina's stock-still form, Kojou quietly apologized.

"...Sorry, this was the only doctor I could think of."

Yukina replied with an understanding shake of her head. Glancing sidelong at the doctor's face, she whispered, "I understand completely now. The apple does not fall far from the tree."

Kojou replied with a dissatisfied twitch of his cheek, but when he looked back, Mimori had her cheek pressed to Yuuma's breasts, blood trickling out of her nose, with a look of pure bliss.

"Don't worry, this is a side effect of my psychometry. It is absolutely not anything untoward."

Mimori raised her face up, plainly stating what was a very unconvincing excuse.

Just wipe your nosebleed already, thought Yukina as she handed over a facial tissue. Apparently, Yukina had somehow returned to normal operating condition.

Taking the tissue, Mimori used it to wipe her nose as she spoke, suddenly in complete seriousness.

"Hmm, this spiritual pathway damage... Yuu's Guardian was ripped right out of her, huh?"

Yukina nodded. Even if Mimori looked like she was just playing around, her diagnosis was dead-on.

The Guardian that Yuuma had acquired through her witch's pact had been stolen. It was as if a cyborg had its artificial heart ripped out of it: The severed spiritual pathways would continue bleeding magical energy until she died from depletion of said energy.

"Can you save her?" Kojou asked uneasily.

Mimori shrugged, smiling enigmatically.

“I’ll bring Yuu into the lab. Could you give me a hand, Yukina?”

“Ah yes...understood.”

Yukina did as she was told and put a hand on the still-sleeping Yuuma’s shoulder.

“Wait. If you’re movin’ Yuuma, then I should—”

“Oh no, you don’t. My lab is No Men Allowed.” Mimori’s tone was suddenly icy.

Like hell it is, thought Kojou with a scowl. But Mimori only added a smile as she looked at him expectantly.

“Yuu’s not the only one who needs treatment, is she? I have a first aid kit in the closet.”

As Mimori spoke, she gave Kojou a right hook to his chest like she was trying to take a chunk out of him.

“Gwuh!” groaned Kojou, falling to his knees then and there.

“S-senpai?!”

“Let’s go, Yukina. Oh, and you can just call me Mom from now on.”

“Eh...? Er, no, that’s... I’m not really in that, ah...”

Mimori and Yukina left Kojou behind in agony as they hauled Yuuma out of the room. Once Kojou saw for himself that Yukina was out of the room, he groaned and flopped onto the floor.

“Shit,” he cursed, looking down at his chest where his mother had smacked him.

Kojou’s own blood was bleeding through the wound, the fresh flow distinct against the dried blood from before.

6

Kojou Akatsuki was a vampire. Half a year before, his flesh had taken on the bizarre demonic properties of the Fourth Primogenitor, the World’s Mightiest

Vampire.

Of course, Kojou was sure that his mother, Mimori, noticed the change in his body because she was a sorcerer physician...but it didn't actually turn out that way. That was because Mimori's ability was extremely specific.

Mimori was a Hyper-Adapter, but she was not a spiritualist. She was extremely sensitive to abnormalities in the body, but she was even less sensitive to spiritual auras than the average person. To put it in high-tech terms, Mimori was a hardware specialist; software was out of her field. If there were no symptoms of a virus, she had no way of detecting that one was even there. Besides, to her, a patient was a patient: It didn't matter if she was dealing with a human or a vampire.

There was no doubt she was eccentric in that regard, but it made her even more effective as a medical researcher. Her big-picture personality was also part of how Kojou had skated by.

"Doesn't mean you have to smack around the wounded, geez..."

Kojou, left alone in the living room, pulled off his shirt and checked on the state of his wound.

He might have been able to fool Yukina, but apparently Mimori had noticed after all.

A heavy-bladed object had gouged open a wound in the left side of his chest a few short centimeters from his heart.

It was the wound Yukina's Snowdrift Wolf had left behind when it had impaled him.

There was no question it was a serious wound, but it wasn't enough to kill a person. It was a simple stab wound; a regenerative ability on the level of a vampire's could well have completely closed it up by now.

But *this* wound hadn't even begun to regenerate. There wasn't much bleeding, but his shirt was still wet from the dampness of fresh blood. It was a situation he'd never been in before.

It didn't stand out that much at present because he'd been carrying around

the blood-soaked Yuuma, but in one sense, Kojou ought to have been quite grateful that Mimori had left him behind like that.

It was already past seven PM.

The Hollow Eve Festival's famous Night Parade ought to have been kicking off right about now. Huge throngs of tourists were no doubt having the time of their lives at the extravagant festival in the center of Itogami City.

But on the other hand, the magical criminals that had escaped from the prison barrier were scattered all over the city about to cause new incidents.

Man, today has sucked. Kojou sighed as he looked up at the ceiling.

It was then that the door to the living room quietly opened.

A tall girl with a ponytail dragged her feet on the way back from the bedroom. It was Sayaka, whom Nagisa had absconded with earlier.

Sayaka looked completely worn out as she shot a resentful glare at Kojou.

"Ugh...you really did a number on me, Kojou Akatsuki. I'm more tired than when I was dealing with the princess..."

Apparently, she was still holding a grudge over his having foisted Nagisa onto her.

Kojou looked up at her while concealing his wound.

"Wait, what happened to Nagisa?"

"I used a hypnotic curse on her. I don't think she'll wake up until morning."

Kojou's reply was a dumbfounded look.

"Incantation...? Geez, you really cut corners..."

He thought it was a bit much for an Attack Mage from the Lion King Agency to actually use a curse on an ordinary middle schooler.

However, Sayaka's lips tapered like those of a pouting child.

"It couldn't be helped! How was I supposed to keep secret from her who you and Yukina really are? Or that Yuuma got hurt or that you two had switched bodies?!"

Kojou lowered his head in genuine reflection.

“R-right. You’re right. Sorry...you’ve been a huge help.”

He couldn’t argue with a single thing she’d said.

“N-not that it pleases me to have Kojou Akatsuki thanking me...! I did this for Yukina and Nagisa, you see.”

“Yeah. Thanks anyway, though. Even without that, you helped us more than once today.”

Sayaka’s cheeks reddened as if she was blushing.

“R-right...you’re very welcome.”

For a girl who seemed to be angry full-time, it was rare to see her react well.

“Well, that’s not the only reason I put Nagisa to sleep, either...”

A suspicious look came over Kojou as he glanced up at Sayaka, who was getting very close for some reason.

“Huh?”

“Where’d Yukina and the others go?” Sayaka brought her face directly in front of Kojou’s eyes as she asked this.

“They took Yuuma over to the lab. There’s all sorts of medical gear and drugs over there, y’see.”

“I see...so they won’t be back for a little while, then. Perfect.”

Sayaka seemed to be mumbling to herself as she grabbed Kojou lightly. For some reason, her touch felt oddly uncomfortable. The brooding look Sayaka had on made Kojou concerned.

Sayaka pointed at Kojou’s bloodstained shirt and commanded, “Kojou Akatsuki. Would you strip off your clothes?”

“Ah?”

“The heck?!” exclaimed Kojou, instantly putting a hand over his own chest.

“...What are you sayin’?! You some kind of molester?!”

Sayaka’s face went red to the tips of her ears as she shook her head.

“I—I’m not! What are you imagining, you creep?! I’m telling you to show me the open wound you’re hiding! Yukina stabbed you with Snowdrift Wolf, didn’t she?!”

“You...noticed that, huh?”

“...I-it’s not that I was looking at you. I’ll have you know that the observation abilities of a Lion King Agency Shamanic War Dancer are world-class. That’s all it is. Got it?”

“I—I see.”

Not that I really understand but guess that’s how it is, Kojou rationalized to himself as he stripped off his shirt.

Sayaka let out a shriek at the sudden sight of Kojou’s bare upper body. “Wh-why did you do that out of the blue?!”

“You’re the one who told me to strip, geez!” Kojou protested.

Sayaka apparently wasn’t immune to the effect of a male body; her extreme reaction struck Kojou as a bit funny.

“W-well, that might be so, but...ugh, you truly are an inconsiderate man, Kojou Akatsuki!”

“What’s consideration got to do with it? Hey, your face is all red. You okay over there?”

“Sh-shut up. Just die already, sheesh!”

Sayaka loudly cleared her throat a few times before apparently recovering her composure. There was still a bit of rose to her cheeks as she touched Kojou’s side with intense interest.

The young woman’s eyes narrowed suspiciously as she looked at Kojou’s obviously untreated wound.

“Why...isn’t this wound healing?”

Kojou gave her a careless shake of his head.

“I don’t know, either, but maybe it’s because it’s Himeragi’s spear that did it?”

Yukina’s Snowdrift Wolf was the Lion King Agency’s secret weapon. It was a

purifying spear that nullified magical energy and was considered capable of destroying even a vampire primogenitor. Kojou had impaled his own body with that dangerous spear to nullify Yuuma's spatial control spell. If something was stopping his vampiric body's regenerative ability, he imagined it had to be some curse from Snowdrift Wolf.

"But Schneewaltzers aren't supposed to come equipped with regeneration-hindering effects. Besides, I feel like this is...less than a wound than the flesh itself being unstable. It's like it's out of phase, like the molecules holding the solid matter together are fragile..."

"Eh?"

Kojou looked back at Sayaka, surprised by her unexpected declaration. At that exact moment, Sayaka raised her own face, unexpectedly resulting in them gazing into each other's eyes from very close.

Both of them became oddly embarrassed and averted their eyes from each other. Now that Kojou thought about it, it'd been a fair while since he'd spoken to Sayaka all alone like this. It was probably the first time since he'd drank Sayaka's blood during the Nalakuvera incident.

"S-so I don't really want to, Kojou Akatsuki, but I will grant you my cooperation."

Kojou had a bad feeling about the sound of that as he looked for clarification.

"...Cooperation?"

Sayaka sat on the sofa opposite Kojou and began pulling off one of the socks that she was wearing. In short order, she thrust the nails of her bare foot right before the bewildered Kojou's eyes.

Kojou was even more bewildered as he beheld the top of Sayaka's shapely foot. *What...is this?*

"Y...you may proceed."

"Huh?"

Sayaka's voice was tight, and she blushed until she was beet red.

"I'm saying I'm granting special permission to drink my blood. If you do your

vampire thing, your regenerative ability will be strengthened, right?!”

“So you’re sayin’ I’ve gotta lick your foot like you’re some kind of princess here...?!”

“B-but arousal is the trigger for vampiric urges, isn’t it? I thought boys went for this kind of thing...! I-if you want, I’ll stomp on you as a reward!”

Sayaka spoke in her best impression of a domineering voice, as if reciting the line from a script. Apparently, someone else had given her the idea. Kojou was assaulted by a fierce headache as he exhaled in annoyance.

“It’s only a tiny subset of guys that like *that* sort of thing! That’s way too fetishy for me!”

Sayaka’s voice flipped right over as she shouted.

“Eh? Ehh?!”

She clutched her head with both hands in anguish, probably from remembering the embarrassment of her own actions just now.

“Th-then what do you go for, Kojou Akatsuki? More like...petting stuff...and stuff?”

“Yeah...well, more into that than gettin’ stomped on, anyway...”

As a high school boy in good health, Kojou could only give the answer that came naturally to him.

“Mm...mmm...w-well, all right! You really are a picky one, Kojou Akatsuki...!”

There was a twinge of desperation in Sayaka’s voice as she roughly stripped off her knitted vest and tossed it aside. Next, she undid the buttons of her shirt from the top down. The earlier declaration that she’d stomp on him had apparently driven her halfway to despair.

“Why’d it turn into that?! You know, I didn’t actually ask you to let me drink your blood!”

“Th-that may be so...but Yukina will notice if your wound isn’t healing. I don’t want to make her worry about that. If I don’t do this, Yukina’s going to have to tell you to drink her own blood. I don’t want to have you drinking Yukina’s

blood, so drink mine first...!”

Sayaka drew close to Kojou’s body as she finally voiced her true feelings. Kojou couldn’t help but make a strained smile now that he understood the reason underlying her odd behavior.

“...You *really* like Himeragi, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. Something wrong with that...?”

“Nah, I think it’s a good thing. I don’t wanna make Himeragi worry more than she has to, either.”

“Oh...r-right.”

Sayaka made a forthright nod. Seeing Kojou making light of himself seemed to clear the air.

She suddenly lost her newfound composure when she remembered she was nestled right up against Kojou, a boy.

In contrast to her tall, slender figure, Sayaka was secretly proud of her large, shapely bust.

She awkwardly pressed her bulging breasts against both of Kojou’s hands.

Her eyes, lined with long lashes, were a little hot and damp at the edges. Seeing the ever-determined Sayaka make such a valiant effort was more than devastating enough to provoke Kojou’s vampiric urges.

Sayaka drew her face close to Kojou’s ear and whispered...

“I think you already know this, but keep this secret from Yukina, okay?”

Seeing her pale neck right before his eyes, Kojou drew his face near as if being reeled in when suddenly he stopped moving, as if he’d turned to ice.

“Well...I thought that was a good idea, too...but...”

Sayaka gazed at Kojou with a look of suspicion.

“...Why are you using past tense?”

That was when she felt a casual voice tossed into her from behind like an icy dagger.

“...Keep what secret?”

A girl was standing at the entrance to the living room, her face almost pretty beyond belief.

She was looking at the position Kojou and Sayaka were in. The expressionless gaze, resembling a slight pout, was emblematic of when she was *really* pissed.

Knowing exactly what that look meant, Sayaka’s voice quivered in fright.

“Y-Yukina?! Wh-why are you...?!”

“I came back thinking I would inform senpai of Yuuma’s condition, but...” Yukina’s black-eyed gaze at Kojou and Sayaka was frosty. “...So, what is it you intend to do that you wish to keep secret from me?”

Sayaka timidly shook her head, unable to find any credible excuse.

“Th-that’s not...that’s not it, Yukina. This is, I mean it’s...”

She couldn’t simply explain the circumstances to Yukina; after all, the whole point of Sayaka offering her own blood was in the hope that Yukina wouldn’t notice the state of Kojou’s wound.

Unable to simply allow Sayaka to flounder, Kojou rose up.

“...Geez.”

But the moment Kojou opened his mouth to make a better excuse to Yukina, he suddenly found himself getting very dizzy.

His vision was turning darker; everything around him seemed to be tilting. He felt weak, like all his strength was draining out of his body. Unable to remain on his feet, he fell to his knees.

Yukina noticed something was wrong with Kojou and rushed right over.

“Senpai?!”

Yukina supported Kojou, who was on the verge of falling over, when Sayaka wailed in distress, “K-Kojou Akatsuki...! Don’t you dare play possum at a time like this...K-Kojou Akatsuki?!”

“Senpai...! Senpai, hang in there!”

Yukina seemed like she was about to cry as she looked down at Kojou.

“Hey, don’t make faces like that,” replied Kojou, sending both girls a pleasant smile as the darkness swallowed his consciousness whole.

7

Island South was a culture-heavy district rich in residential housing and educational facilities. In short, it was a quiet place untouched by the extravagant festival. Saikai Academy, a hybrid middle and high school, had been built on a gentle hill in that southern district. The artificial greenery of the hemmed-in schoolyard was immersed in the peaceful silence of the night.

A voice with an odd ring to it breached that silence.

“This place has a deep connection to both of us. Does it not...Natsuki?”

There was a young woman on the roof of the empty school building.

Her hair went down almost to her feet. She wore a ceremonial ladies’ dress colored white and black. She had a graceful visage and scarlet eyes. It was Aya Tokoyogi, the witch with eyes of fire.

Natsuki was not there, but Aya’s calm voice spoke as if she were.

“Saikai Academy...a precious place to thee, ’tis it not? Then there is no more fitting place for *my* world to begin.”

That was when the air at her back began to quiver. The darkness seemed to melt away to reveal young men wearing nondescript gray suits. It was a pair of men with ages difficult to discern, but she did not sense any special violence from their auras. Their faces were forthright; there was nothing suspicious about the clothes they wore. Had they claimed to be teachers of Saikai Academy, most people would have accepted their word without question.

However, the men were each holding one book in their hands. These were grimoires emitting malevolent magical energy.

“Ma’am...”

The man on the left knelt respectfully and looked up at his witch. Meanwhile,

the one on the right bowed his head in a similar show of respect.

“Congratulations on your return from the prison barrier.”

Aya slowly turned her head and looked back at the two consorts.

“...Men from LCO?”

She did not know the pair but knew immediately what they were: operatives from the Library of Criminal Organizations—the “Library” for short, an international criminal syndicate.

“We are Librarians from the Third Branch, the Socials.”

Once the first man spoke, both quietly raised their heads. Aya gave them an ill-humored stare. “I had thought the escape plan had been entrusted to Philosophy...?”

The man on the left tossed a smile into his reply.

“This is correct; however, you are the leader of all of LCO. We did not believe we could rely on merely the Meyer Sisters to facilitate your escape.”

Next, the man on the right cleared his throat.

“Indeed, it would seem they have lost their Guardian and have been captured by Demon Sanctuary law enforcement. We are to escort you to a safe place from this point forward.”

Aya interrupted the pair, unmoved. “I see. Good work. However, I have no need of your assistance. There is still something I must do in this Demon Sanctuary.”

Surprise was written upon the Librarians’ faces.

“...You cannot mean you intend to resume from ten years ago?”

They kept civil, pleasant smiles still plastered onto their faces, but that could not conceal the faint bloodlust they gave off. Aya curled up the corners of her lips, taunting.

“And if I do?”

“We regret to inform you...we have received orders that, in the event you do not cooperate, we are to destroy you and recover the Black Bible.”

The men stood without a sound and opened their grimoires.

Aya continued to stand defenselessly, murmuring as she watched the men.

“I see...so that is what the old men of the Socials...believe. Peasants.”

The Black Bible was one of the grimoires that Aya had removed from LCO’s secret vault some ten years prior. She had unleashed the grimoire on the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island, inflicting grievous damage upon it. However, her *experiment* had been stopped by Natsuki Minamiya, still in high school at the time, and Aya had been locked away behind the prison barrier.

Knowing that Aya was returning from the prison barrier, LCO obviously wanted the Black Bible back. The men now sent Aya’s way wore what were clearly expressions of mockery.

“Ma’am, to us, the chosen few, ten years has been far too long. There is no longer any place for you in today’s LCO.”

To both men already brandishing their grimoires, Aya shot a frigid declaration:

“I care not. I no longer have any use for LCO. You may have the Black Bible from me...provided, of course, that you can take it—”

“So negotiations have failed, then... Restrain her, No. 343!”

Their faces twisting in naked hostility, the men released the magic of their tomes. The books of power, activated through the absorption of their readers’ magical energy, released a miasma dire enough to warp the very air that then attacked Aya.

Aya smiled charmingly as she looked down at her own feet.

“Your grimoires...speed chanting, yes? Well done...”

She could not move her lower body. Bathed in the pages’ magical energy, her flesh had been petrified and fused with the campus building’s exterior.

Slender, closely packed symbols appeared on the surface of Aya’s petrified flesh. This was a criminal code written in an ancient language. These characters, infused with ritual energy, nullified Aya’s teleportation magic, cutting off her means of escape.

These particular grimoires arrested and petrified only those who had committed grave crimes. Such was the ability of No. 343, known as the *Grimoire of the Law*. Soon, Aya's entire body would be petrified, turning her into a living statue.

However, in full knowledge of this, Aya smiled nonetheless.

"And yet...futile. You have already been overrun by the Black Bible."

"What...?!"

The men recoiled a step as Aya's fiery eyes glared at them.

In their hands, the pages of the grimoires simply fell apart.

The miasma released by the grimoires suddenly dissipated. The stones covering Aya's body broke apart; her freedom of movement was restored.

"...Page unto page, darkness unto darkness... Go back, for all is according to my pact."

Her assailants' voices quivered as they clutched their now-powerless grimoires.

"Aya Tokoyogi...surely, you have not already...!"

Their fearful gazes were directed not at Aya, but at the symbols drawn at her feet. It was a magic circle written with but a single character. The ancient runes engraved onto the roof of the campus building gently emitted a golden light. This was the twinkling radiance that would lead the world into the darkness of the night.

Unimpressed, Aya stated, "Have you forgotten, Librarians, who halted my experiment ten years ago? My Black Bible was taken from me by Natsuki Minamiya, the Witch of the Void, the only friend my old self allowed into my heart. However, I have stolen the infernal traitor's time, and now the Black Bible is once more within my grasp!"

"Ugh...!"

The gray suits drew pistols from their flanks. Having lost their books, they had no options remaining save physical attacks.

Their hands were shaking. Aya coldly gazed at the pistols as she gave her Guardian a command.

“Librarians, this is... farewell. L’Ombre—!”

The illusion of a knight clad in dark armor emerged at Aya’s back and lashed out with its giant sword.

Death screams echoed out; then, silence embraced the rooftop once more.

Only the witch remained, smiling as she stood amid the golden light.



CHAPTER TWO
THE PURSUED
VS.
THE JAILBREAKERS

CHAPTER TWO

THE PURSUED VS. THE JAILBREAKERS

1

The smell of cheese wafted up from the freshly baked pizza.

Sitting on the table, it was a simple frozen pizza that had been on hand, but it looked like a feast to the hungry. Frozen pizza formed the bulk of Mimori's diet, so there was always a large number of them available in the guesthouse.

Sayaka grumbled as she pinched a slice of pizza and brought it to her lips.

"If only you really had died...!"

The target of her sharp, icy gaze was Kojou, who was in the process of spreading some olive oil onto some pizza.

And glaring at Kojou from the side was a sullen Yukina.

"Yes, this time was a little...much," she admitted.

Kojou felt distinctly uncomfortable at having the two Attack Mage girls glare at him. "...Wha—?"

He was certainly sorry for having made them worry. But he thought the girls were behaving rather coldly to someone who'd fainted some ten minutes before. Noticing the defiant look Kojou was giving off, Sayaka's graceful eyebrows heavily furled.

"What's the big idea, getting dizzy and fainting from an empty stomach?! If you're about to collapse, tell someone before you do it! What kind of glutton are you?!"

"I couldn't help it!" Kojou replied. "How the hell was I supposed to know Yuuma hadn't eaten one thing when she was usin' my body?!"

Apparently, Yuuma hadn't had a single thing to eat during the half a day that she and Kojou had swapped bodies. Furthermore, during that time, Yuuma had executed a number of large-scale spells and had engaged in spectacular combat with Yukina; small wonder Kojou's body was famished.

So, even after returning to his own physical body, Kojou hadn't realized that he was starving, eventually collapsing from hunger. It was a little hard for him to accept the blame for that.

Nonetheless, it was true that the wound in his chest had caused a great deal of misunderstanding.

"But it's my bad for makin' you worry. Sorry about that."

Seeing Kojou meekly lower his head, Sayaka finally softened her expression. "Ah, yeah...you really did..." After that, she immediately gasped as her face reddened. "No, I mean, I did not worry about you one tiny bit whatsoever, Kojou Akatsuki...!"

"That so. That's good, then..."

This time, Kojou's easy acceptance of Sayaka's words made her puff out her cheeks, apparently displeased. As usual, Kojou couldn't really figure out why she reacted like this...but he thought, *It's kinda funny how she changes faces so much.*

Yukina let out a small sigh as she watched the interaction between Kojou and Sayaka. "However, it is good that the situation was no worse than this."

Kojou agreed from the bottom of his heart. "Yeah, definitely."

With Yuuma gravely wounded and Natsuki's whereabouts unknown, Kojou being down for the count would've really sent them up a creek.

For whatever reason, Kojou's chest wound ached heavily whenever he used his vampiric abilities and was draining his strength. But if he wasn't pushing it, the pain and bleeding were on a level he could cope with.

Kojou gave Yukina's clothes a long, hard look as he spoke.

"Anyway, Himeragi, what's with the nurse outfit?"

She was currently wearing a nurse-style, one-piece dress complete with

miniskirt. She was even wearing the kind of nurse's cap you didn't see often nowadays. She also had knee-high socks over her feet.



Yukina lowered her face in embarrassment as she explained meekly, “M-Mrs. Aka... I mean, Mimori said I needed to change into this before entering the lab...”

Certainly, the blue apron dress she’d been wearing was shredded in the course of heavy combat. Her changing into a nurse’s outfit was entirely legitimate from a sanitation perspective. However, unused to wearing the outfit, Yukina seemed quite nervous.

“S-so, it does look odd on me?”

Kojou’s response was frank. “No, I think it suits you really well...maybe too well.”

Yukina gave off a prim and proper sense to begin with; the nurse outfit amplified that, almost to excess.

Of course it does, thought Sayaka as she nodded in silent agreement. Her breathing grew ragged as she stared all over Yukina’s body, as if running her tongue everywhere, to the point Kojou thought she’d be pulling Yukina to the floor right about then had he not been there with them.

Judging that they’d better switch from the nurse outfit to another subject, Kojou asked, “So, how is Yuuma, anyway?”

Yukina nodded, a little relieved.

“Her wounds have been bandaged. Her life should not be in any immediate danger.”

Tension drained away from Kojou’s entire body.

“That so...that’s good...”

It was good news, if only for the moment. At the very least, they’d avoided it becoming too late to save her.

However, Yukina bit down fiercely on her lip as she shook her head.

“But Mimori said that...we cannot expect her to recover from her present state...”

“So even MAR’s gear won’t cut it...?”

“A witch’s pact is a type of super high-end magic spell that cannot be analyzed with today’s level of science. Of course, that means the curse cannot be lifted, and in the first place, there’s far too little data for a definitive diagnosis...”

“...That’s too bad,” Kojou murmured, looking pained.

He was ready for it, but being reminded of the depth of the situation still hurt. At this rate, they wouldn’t be able to save Yuuma from the deep spiritual damage that had been inflicted upon her. It meant Aya Tokoyogi truly had intended to toss Yuuma aside like yesterday’s garbage.

“According to Mimori, only a powerful witch could be relied upon to save Yuuma now. She said that if there’s another witch with power equal to or greater than Aya Tokoyogi, then it *is* possible—”

“Natsuki...then?” Kojou interjected gravely.

She was a witch of power equal to or greater than Aya Tokoyogi. Besides, he didn’t think anyone other than Natsuki Minamiya would agree to cooperate in healing Yuuma.

Sayaka calmly pointed out the problem with that:

“But we don’t know where Natsuki Minamiya is, do we? Besides, she’s lost her magic and has the escaped prisoners after her, yes?”

Sayaka hadn’t been there, but she’d had the high points explained to her.

If the jailbreakers spoke the truth, Natsuki was currently in a defenseless state, having lost her memories and her magical power. If they were going to save Yuuma, they needed to keep Natsuki safe and restore her to full strength.

“No choice but to look for her,” replied Kojou. “If we don’t find Natsuki before the prisoners do...”

“I suppose so,” Yukina added. “If Ms. Minamiya can recover her magical power, she should also be able to restore the prison barrier to full functionality.”

Yukina strongly agreed with Kojou’s statement. If they could get the prison barrier back to full operating condition, the escaped prisoners would be pulled right back inside it once again.

Natsuki was the center around which the entire incident revolved.

“But how do we look for her?” Sayaka asked, at a loss. “The city’s jam-packed with people for the Hollow Eve Festival...”

“...Yeah, it is,” Kojou agreed, focused on the television as he spoke. “I don’t think we’ll find her by just groping around.”

A local Itogami Island station was running a live Hollow Eve Festival broadcast. It was already past eight PM. The sidewalks along the city’s thoroughfares were packed with tourists waiting for the Night Parade.

Under normal circumstances, the horribly stifling dresses Natsuki wore would make her really stand out in a crowd, but that wasn’t true that night. The island was brimming with tourists wearing even more extravagant costumes than she did.

Yukina made a suggestion while divvying up the rest of the pizza.

“How about we ask the Island Guard for help?”

The Island Guard, in charge of upholding the law in the Demon Sanctuary, was quite likely to find Natsuki before the escaped convicts could—but that was providing the Island Guard could devote the heavy manpower necessary.

Sayaka hummed thoughtfully and knitted her eyebrows. “I’m sure they’re well aware the prison barrier’s been breached, so we could make the request...but I don’t think we should get our hopes up. They have to be really short on manpower right now. There’s not just the escapees, there’s still LCO remnants to take care of...”

Kojou lazily rested his chin on his palms as he contemplated it. “The Island Guard, huh...?”

Although a police service on the surface, the Island Guard was really a private army under the control of the Gigafloat Management Corporation. Their greatest advantage came from employing the vast amount of data collected from information networks all across the man-made island. If they could provide even just suspicious-person witness reports or surveillance camera photos, those alone ought to have made finding Natsuki a breeze—

“...Asagi might be able to search the Island Guard’s info for us.”

“Eh? Asagi...you mean, Asagi Aiba?” Sayaka asked, suddenly glaring at Kojou in displeasure. “I’ve been wondering this for a while...what in the world is she?”

“Whaddaya mean, what...? She’s just a student with a part-time job, right...?” Kojou had no idea why Sayaka saw Asagi as her rival to such a large degree.

But the Gigafloat Management Corporation had rolled the red carpet out for Asagi because of her hacking skills. She probably didn’t even need to do any cracking for something as simple as finding Natsuki.

It was then that Yukina, who happened to be glancing at the TV at that moment, suddenly murmured, “Aiba...”

Kojou turned to her, confused. “Eh?”

Yukina rushed to explain. “Just now, I thought I saw someone who looked a lot like Aiba...ah, there, again!”

She pointed at the corner of the screen. Kojou made a short sound when he recognized a very familiar face as well.

It was at the curb of a sidewalk along a major thoroughfare. A high school girl with a fancy hairstyle was standing there, mingled in with the tourists watching the parade. She had an arm around a little girl with long hair who looked four or five years old.

“Asagi...? What the heck is she doin’ there...?”

Sayaka inclined her head slightly, looking at Kojou like it was his surprise that was odd.

“Isn’t she just bringing her little sister along to watch the parade?”

Certainly, it was nothing unusual for residents of Itogami Island to watch the Hollow Eve Festival parade. If it’d only been Asagi on the screen, Kojou wouldn’t have been shaken to the degree he was.

“N-no... Y’see, Asagi doesn’t have a little sister... ’S it a relative’s kid maybe?”

It was Yukina who finally voiced the question Kojou was afraid to ask.

“Senpai...doesn’t she look like...?”

“Yeah, but...I mean, it couldn’t be...”

The girl was like a little doll dressed in a stifling, lace-heavy dress. Plus, she had an odd aura of power around her for no apparent reason. The little girl Asagi had an arm around sure looked an awful lot like Natsuki Minamiya...

Yes, Aya Tokoyogi had said as much: Her grimoire had stolen Natsuki’s time and experience. That meant it was more than possible Natsuki’s physical body had gone back in time, too...

Yukina had a hand on her nurse’s cap as she murmured uneasily, “This broadcast...is this being sent to every display in the city?”

The parade was being broadcast on the sides of buildings, the storefronts of electronics boutiques, inside rail stations, and on television screens in numerous other locations. And when you put a high schooler with showy looks with a little girl in a lace dress, they stood out even in a crowd of costumed tourists. If one of the escaped convicts after Natsuki just happened to be looking at one of those screens—

“You’ve gotta be kidding me?!”

This is real bad, Kojou thought as he clutched his head—only to dive for his cell phone a moment later.

2

Dancers dressed in risqué bikini armor performed a marvelous sword dance as they paraded down Main Street.

Even by Night Parade standards, the “Ride of the Valkyries” was always the number one— or number two—rated program. The band accompanying the dancers was performing epic opera music, raising the tension level of the onlookers.

Asagi heard her cell phone ringtone right before the climax of that stirring performance. Though heavily tempted to ignore it, she changed her mind midway and reluctantly pulled out the vibrating phone. But when Asagi saw the name displayed on the screen, her eyes widened.

“Sorry, Sana. Could you come with me for a bit?”

Asagi split off from the crowd of sightseers on the sidewalk and headed toward a quieter alley. Though she expected complaints about not being able to see the parade, Sana went right along with her. Relieved by that, Asagi pressed her cell phone to her ear.

“—Hello? Kojou?”

For some reason, Kojou’s voice sounded tense.

“Asagi?! Where are you right now?”

Bewildered by his uncharacteristic behavior, Asagi looked around the area.

“Where...? I’m in front of the Quadra Building, not far from Keystone Gate. The main parade’s just about to pass by.”

“That’s what I thought from seein’ you on TV just now.”

“Eh? No way...?! You saw?”

Asagi went “geh” with a twitch of her cheek.

Thanks to her part-time job turning into a sleepover, Asagi was still wearing the same clothes as that morning; her makeup was all a mess, too. Letting Kojou of all people see her like that was a major blunder on her part.

However, Kojou paid no heed to the young woman’s distress and switched to a different question.

“You have a little girl with you, right?”

“...Erm?”

Asagi knit her brow as she looked down at Sana, standing right beside her. She had no idea why Kojou would react to seeing an ordinary girl with her on TV. She was *pretty sure* his interests didn’t run that way—

“Well, I do, but...”

“Who is she? Someone you know?”

“Nah, she’s lost. She seems familiar, but I can’t really put my finger on it.”

The phone conveyed Kojou’s sense of bewilderment.

“...Lost? What’s her name?”

“She doesn’t seem to remember... Ah, does this mean that you know her, Kojou? I mean, she looks just like Natsuki, doesn’t she? I couldn’t just leave her on her own.”

“Th-that so...”

Kojou covered the microphone on his end and began whispering to someone. Asagi frowned in displeasure. The first image that came to mind was the face of Yukina Himeragi. She also remembered Yuuma Tokoyogi, Kojou’s childhood friend. Perhaps Kojou was chattering with those girls that very moment...

However, when she heard Kojou’s voice once more, it seemed filled with a strange tension that was far from the festival’s happy mood.

“Look, Asagi...I want you to listen very closely.”

“O-okay.”

“That girl, she might actually be—”

Sana shouted, interrupting Kojou’s words.

“—Mama!”

Surprised at Sana pulling on her arm in fright, Asagi turned her head and looked behind her.

Sana was glaring at a bald man approaching them from the dark alley.

The man was probably sixty-odd years old. He was quite well-built for his age; his bony physique was covered with simple and humble cloth. His skin was fairly sunburned. He somehow gave off the air of a serious yoga practitioner.

When he spoke, the old man’s voice was raspy.

“Found you.”

His eyes were aimed straight at Sana.

Asagi immediately stepped in front of the girl, shielding her.

“Um? Er...mister? What is your relationship to—?”

The old man gave Asagi a single malevolent glance. It was the kind of

disinterested glance one gave an annoying weed.

“Out of my way, girl... Hand over the Witch of the Void now.”

Kojou’s voice came over the phone again, bewildered. *“Asagi? Asagi, what’s wrong?”*

Perhaps it was the sound of a familiar voice that finally snapped her back to lucidity.

Asagi cautiously stepped back while she warily kept her eyes on the intruder.

“There’s this weird geezer coming our way—”

The old man glared at Asagi and shouted, “Pest! Begone—”

His entire body became tinged with red. This was not from blood rushing to his skin out of anger; his very body had begun to emit light like metal heated to a high temperature.

A hazy shimmer made the air waver behind him. Even at a distance, Asagi could feel the scalding air blowing off him.

The way the red-hot old man held super high-temperature flames within his body made him look like an Efreet.

Asagi cried out as she realized what the old man was.

“A Spirit Master—?!”

Spirits were energy beings that existed in other-dimensional space. They were masses of spiritual energy of extremely high purity.

When summoned into the world of men, elemental spirits fell apart and vanished instantaneously. High-ranking sorcerers and holy men could make use of them for attack spells, but put another way, they had no better way to employ the beings due to their natural explosive state.

It was said that only through use of a giant warship-scale spiritual reactor could one summon a spirit and keep it stable. It wasn’t something an individual could use.

However, there were extremely rare exceptions. These were the Spirit Masters—those who summoned spirits.

It was said that the crown princess of the Northern European kingdom of Aldegia was able to summon spirits into her own flesh and freely wield their spiritual power. This geezer was probably a spirit summoner in a similar vein.

Of course, what he had called up was by no means a high-ranking spirit like those employed by the Aldegian princess. Rather, it was an Efreet of far lower status.

However, on the basis of pure attack power, it still put all other sorcerers to shame. The old man was a monster in human flesh, far more frightening than demonkind.

Asagi's decision came quickly.

"Sana, run!"

Promptly realizing that Sana was the old man's target, she ran, pulling the girl along by her hand. Sana desperately clung to Asagi, half-dragged along in the process.

She no longer had any time to speak with Kojou. Asagi fished out her other smartphone and shouted into the microphone as she ran with all her strength.

"This isn't funny, dammit—Mogwai!"

A synthetic voice with a sarcastic air flowed into her ear.

"I hear ya', Li'l Miss."

This was Asagi's partner—the artificial intelligence, Mogwai.

"Situation?!"

"All analyzed. The old man is Kiliga Gilika. He was born into guerillas in the Kabul valley in the Middle East, a monster who used a spell to transplant an Efreet into his own body to kill his enemies more efficiently. Six years ago, he was arrested on Itogami Island for attempted terrorism and sent to the prison barrier."

Asagi was beside herself. "The prison barrier? You mean that's not just some urban legend?"

It was supposedly a prison hidden somewhere in the Demon Sanctuary where

the worst of the worst magical criminals were imprisoned. So did that mean the old man was an escapee who'd busted loose? It was hard to believe, but Asagi didn't think Mogwai would tell tall tales at a time like this.

The old man wasn't all that fast a runner. At best, he was moving at about the same pace at which Asagi and Sana were running for their lives. However, the old man simply burned away decorative trees and signs obstructing his path, letting him pursue by the shortest possible route. At their current rate, it was only a matter of time before he caught up with them.

"Ugh...Mogwai, calculate route! We're heading for the utility tunnel to Keystone Gate's Entrance E. You handle the bulkheads!"

"Entrance E, huh? Roger that. Take a right at the next turn, down the stairs to the underground shopping center...there's a hatch to the utility tunnel when you get to the landing."

Instantly reading what Asagi was planning, Mogwai immediately told her which way to flee. Fortunately, the back alleys had been largely swept clean of people while everyone went to see the parade; there was nary a pedestrian in sight to block their escape.

Picking up Sana's small body, Asagi ran down the stairs and immediately set eyes on the hatch. It was the entrance to a utility tunnel used for work on water lines and buried electrical cables.

Mogwai had already used remote control to unlock the hatch. Asagi kicked the hatch open and plunged into the poorly lit maintenance tunnel. It was a long tunnel not quite two meters in diameter.

After, Asagi ran about fifty meters down the tunnel before falling to her knees. Her endurance was finally at its limits. It was too great a burden for an ordinary high school girl running all out while carrying a little girl in her arms.

For his part, Kiliga Gilika had already entered the tunnel in pursuit of Asagi and Sana.

A thick shutter descended between them, seemingly meant to cut the old man off from the girls. It was an emergency bulkhead meant to protect the man-made island from fire, flooding, and demonic attack.

The bulkhead was some twenty-four centimeters thick, made of high-strength steel imbued with magical energy. It was designed to be ridiculously tough, to the point of resisting even attacks from vampires' Beast Vassals. Surely even a sorcerous criminal able to summon an Efreet could not easily breach it?

Asagi looked behind her. "It'd be nice if he just gave up, but—"

She twitched with terror, suddenly noticing that the surface of the thick, tenacious bulkhead was emitting a hot orange light.

The super high-temperature flames under Kiliga Gilika's control were boiling and melting the bulkhead at an incredible speed beyond her wildest expectations.

"This ain't good, Li'l Miss... The bulkhead's gettin' whittled down faster than expected. Its temperature's gone past the design specs."

In other words, magic-infused steel was resistant to attack spells, but it wasn't any stronger than the steel itself against non-magical damage.

Gilika probably didn't even use spells. He didn't seem capable of anything as deft as using his summoned Efreet as a spiritual reactor to power offensive magic. He was just conducting the Efreet's heat. But his method of attack was hard to counter precisely because it was so primitive.

Sana seemed to have decided on something as she looked up at Asagi.

"Mama..."

Her expression almost seemed to be conveying, *I'm staying here...run for it!*

Goodness gracious, thought Asagi as she exhaled. She embraced Sana around her small shoulders with an impetuous smile.

"It's all right. I'll protect you, whatever it takes—we can't have him looking down on us Demon Sanctuary natives."

Asagi picked up Sana once again. She didn't mean it as an empty gesture.

The bulkhead was completely melted. The shutter parted as hot, bubbling ooze, and the red-hot old man emerged behind it. Now that the bulkhead was no more, their only option left was to run.

However, neither Asagi nor Sana had recovered enough strength to sprint at full speed.

The raspy voice of Kiliga Gilika heartily laughed instead. “What’s wrong, girl? This all you’ve got?”

The man was about ten meters away from them, but the heat his entire body was spewing felt right at their backs.

Mogwai laughed with a sarcastic “keh-heh” as it reported, *“He’s gonna catch up with you, Li’l Miss, in about thirteen...no, twelve seconds!”*

The old man was extending his fire-shrouded arm when Asagi beamed fiercely and stopped where she stood, turning around and glaring at him.

“Excellent...! Right on schedule!”

That moment, a sidewall of the underground tunnel suddenly opened; something gushed in, accompanied by a great roar.

The old man’s body was smashed in the flank and tossed aside.

Sana’s shocked eyes opened wide.

Cold water droplets sprayed all around, soaking Asagi’s feet.

It was water. An underground water vein was gushing in from the wall with incredible force, slamming into Kiliga Gilika’s body like a hammer.

“Arrrrrrrg! You little bitch...!”

When the rushing water touched the red-hot personage, it instantly exceeded the boiling point and exploded as steam. It was Kiliga Gilika who was blown away by that shock wave.

Furthermore, the force of the water gushing in from the wall did not diminish. Gilika was dragged into the backflow of the water, only to be slammed against the exterior wall once more.

Sana watched it all in shock as Asagi explained into her ear, “I had the water flow reversed.”

To stop municipal facilities from being flooded by heavy rain, the interior of the Gigafloats had drainpipes crisscrossing through them. The drainage pipes

used solenoid pumps and sump pumps to prevent backflow from seawater, but Asagi and Mogwai had taken over the controls to pull seawater in and deliberately flood the underground maintenance shaft.

With Sana still in her arms, Asagi climbed on top of an inspection ladder to prevent them from being swept up in the rushing water. This was the escape route Asagi and Mogwai had cooked up together.

Asagi slid the manhole cover open and escaped to the surface. The subterranean shaft had already been flooded to the brim.

Surely even Kiliga Gilika's ability to have a super high-temperature Efreet possess him did not allow him to move freely underwater. However, Asagi's expression remained grave.

"I'd like to say, enjoy being flushed into the ocean...but I'm not that naive."

The asphalt covering the road behind Asagi and Sana was giving off a strange smell as it melted. None other than Kiliga Gilika crawled out from under it.

White smoke was spewing from the old man's entire body. He had a series of creepy sunburn-like splotches all over his skin. Apparently, being bathed in a vast amount of seawater had significantly weakened his Efreet.

The old man ground his teeth as he growled, "Now you've really done it, girl..."

He approached Asagi and Sana, dragging his feet with each and every step. Even worn down like this, Kiliga Gilika's combat capability was a grave threat. And Asagi and Sana had no endurance left to flee with, nor was there any usable facility left to flee to.

The old man's right arm spewed high-temperature flames once more.

"Wonderful...it's been so long since I've had such lively prey. I was disappointed when I'd heard the Witch of the Void had lost her powers, but *you* are an enemy worthy of being burned to ash by my flames!"

Asagi shook her head. "Sorry, but I'm not respectful enough of the elderly to waste my time with a selfish, senile geezer like you... Mogwai!"

"Keh-keh. Ah, looks like ya' made it in time—please 'n' thank you."

It was a flat, quiet voice that responded to the AI's verbal request.

"Accept."

This voice came from a homunculus girl with glimmering, pale blue eyes. Like glittering wings, giant rainbow-colored arms spread out from her back.

The giant arms moved like whips as they slammed down upon Kiliga Gilika. There was a dull impact sound as the air clapped, like two huge boulders had rammed each other.

Smashed into the wall of a building, fresh blood flowed out from the old man's body like it was lava.

"Guah...!"

A dazzling beam from a searchlight shone mercilessly upon him.

As the old man raised his face, he found a giant golem had appeared before him, swallowing the homunculus girl inside of it in the process. It was a humanoid-shaped Beast Vassal, shrouded in transparent, fleshy armor.

Behind the Beast Vassal, an Island Guard mechanized unit had deployed, weapons fully at the ready. Asagi hadn't called them over; they'd been right there from the beginning.

This was Keystone Gate's E Entrance—the emergency deployment route where the Island Guard's main force was always on standby.

Asagi hadn't been blindly running around. She'd used herself as her own decoy to lure her adversary right to the Island Guard's doorstep.

And to Kiliga Gilika's greater misfortune, Astarte had been visiting the Island Guard's garrison while searching for the missing Natsuki.

The shake of the assassin's head seemed to say, *Unbelievable*.

"A homunculus...controlling a Beast Vassal...?!"

Beast Vassals were summoned beasts from another world. They were masses of magical energy so dense that they were sentient and could turn solid.

Though the Efreet that Gilika controlled had a ridiculous level of spiritual power, it was not a being that contradicted the physical laws of the world itself.

That was why spiritual reactors and so forth could be maintained through man-made means.

But Beast Vassals were not so gentle.

Beast Vassals, by their very nature, were beings that did not belong in this world. Furthermore, as much as Beast Vassals possessed destructiveness far beyond the norm, the price the summoner paid to materialize them was his own life force.

Vampires were feared as the mightiest of all demons because their infinite negative life forces, and theirs alone, allowed them to employ Beast Vassals.

And yet, here a powerless homunculus girl was freely employing such a Beast Vassal before his very eyes—

“This is insane!” Gilika rose and spread his incandescent flames as he moved to punch Astarte.

It was the Efreet flame attack that could melt apart a thick metal bulkhead in a single instant.

However, one of the Beast Vassal’s giant arms stopped the attack cold.

“—Execute, Rhododactylos,” came the emotionless voice of Astarte.

Kiliga Gilika’s eyes opened wide in fright. The force of the flames emitted by his flesh was weakening. Astarte’s Beast Vassal was robbing his Efreet of its spiritual strength.

“You’re...*eating*...my spiritual power...?!” the old man suddenly shrieked.

The voice of the homunculus girl in the giant humanoid Beast Vassal calmly replied...

“Affirmative.”

With all his spiritual power depleted, Kiliga Gilika was being pressed face-first against the ground by the Beast Vassal’s giant arm. Of course, he was no longer conscious by then.

As he lay on the ground, the gray manacle on his left arm glowed; from it, silver chains enveloped his entire body. Then, the old man’s body sank into thin

air, finally vanishing completely.

3

The giant Beast Vassal shimmered like a mirage and vanished, leaving only the homunculus girl in its place. Her long indigo hair swayed as she approached Asagi and Sana.

“Miss Aiba, are you injured?”

Asagi looked down at herself and gave a strained smile.

“Ah no, I’m all right. My clothes are a mess, though.”

Her street clothes looked pathetic, dirty from the maintenance shaft and drenched in seawater. She’d only just bought them, but she had no choice now but to throw them away. The sandals she’d liked so much were all scuffed up, too. At least Sana’s clothes hadn’t gotten dirty.

“Thank you, Astarte. You being here really saved our bacon. But why are you here, anyway—?”

Astarte briefly explained her reason for being at the Island Guard garrison:

“I am currently searching for the instructor.”

Asagi was well aware that her guardian, Natsuki Minamiya, also worked as an instructor for the Island Guard in her role as an Attack Mage.

Consequently, Astarte visiting the Island Guard garrison to meet Natsuki Minamiya was not mysterious in itself. However...

“Searching for...? Wait, you mean Natsuki’s missing?”

Astarte nodded as she turned her sapphire-like eyes toward Sana.

“Affirmative. However...her physical characteristics match the instructor’s to an extremely high degree. May I request an explanation?”

“Physical characteristics match...? Oh, you mean how they look so alike?”

Certainly, Asagi had noticed that Natsuki Minamiya and Sana resembled each other to a surprising degree, but she couldn’t give an answer she didn’t have.

Asagi seemed to remember something while stroking Sana's head.

"Come to think of it, that jailbreaker seemed like he was after Sana, huh...? As for why they look so much alike, that's what I wanna know, too, but..."

Asagi's words reached that point when she heard a small *click* of shoes behind her. It was the echo of someone agilely leaping down from the rooftop of a building and making a graceful landing.

The sound startled Sana; she looked behind her in fright.

The next moment, they heard a voice with a sultry air that seemed to mock the act.

"...Hmm, shall I tell you, then?"

A woman was standing where Kiliga Gilika had vanished from. She was a young woman with violet hair. Beyond the long coat that covered her, she was dressed only in expensive, scandalous undergarments. The outfit seemed a little too much to be a festival costume.

The woman brushed her long hair from her cheek as she laughed in mockery.

"It's not simply a resemblance...she really is Natsuki Minamiya. She's just under a little curse at the moment."

Her left arm bore a gray manacle that was identical to the one Kiliga Gilika had. That meant she, too, was an escapee from the prison barrier.

All the Island Guard troops raised their weapons. Even the sight of that did not make her beautiful smile falter. The guardsmen were thrown off by her reaction; they couldn't tell if they should open fire.

Asagi kept her guard up. "Who...are you?"

The corners of the woman's lips rose in delight. "Gigliola Ghirardi—does that name ring a bell?"

Asagi had a chill run down her spine. "...The Songstress of Cuartas Theater," she moaned.

Gigliola Ghirardi was a vampire—an Old Guard vampire descended from the Third Primogenitor, the Chaos Bride. And a vampire all the while, she was also a

high-class prostitute involved in numerous sex scandals with royals and nobility in every nation of Europe.

Her fortunes had changed some five years before, just after an affair with the crown prince of a small country had been discovered. Fearing a scandal, members of the royal family decided to have her quietly assassinated. Deeply enraged, she had annihilated the assassins that had assaulted her and slaughtered several members of the royal family instead, the crown prince included.

In the vernacular, it became known as the Tragedy of Cuartas Theater.

As a result, other prior thrill-seeking crimes by her were discovered, an international arrest warrant was issued, and finally, she was arrested—and ought to have still been in prison.

Gigliola smiled, amused, as she watched the fright pass through Asagi. “I’m so pleased that there are still children that remember me.”

“Why are you...on Itogami Island...?!” Asagi asked brokenly.

The Tragedy of Cuartas Theater was an incident well-known all over the world, much reported on in Japan, enough that even Asagi, still in grade school at the time, remembered it like it had been yesterday.

However, that was an incident in another country far, far away. Asagi couldn’t understand why she’d appeared on Itogami Island rather than in some European prison.

Gigliola shrugged her shoulders with a frivolous air as she replied to Asagi’s skeptical question.

“I slightly overdid it at the Hispania Demon Prison.”

“Overdid it...?”

Gigliola waved her hand casually. “Yes, I took over the prisoners and the guards and toyed with them as I wished, which of course became a large ruckus. In the end, the Witch of the Void was sent, and I was put into the prison barrier—”

Asagi just stared.

To Europe's demons, the Hispania Demon Prison was synonymous with terror. It was said that none of the many sorcerous criminals housed there ever returned alive.

And yet, she had said she'd taken the place over. If that was true, she was an even more dangerous being than she was rumored to be, enough that she might be able to destroy Itogami Island single-handedly—

Gigliola spoke in a gentle tone this time.

"So you see, I bear no grudge toward this Demon Sanctuary. If you simply hand the girl over, I shall let you go."

As Sana stood close, Asagi firmly embraced the child's body and glared straight back at the woman.

"You don't really think I'll just go, 'oh, sure,' and hand her over, do you...?!"

Astarte summoned her Beast Vassal once more and stood before Gigliola to shield Asagi and Sana.

"I concur. Please stand back, Miss Aiba."

Gigliola exhaled in melancholy as she gazed at the giant rainbow-colored Beast Vassal.

Astarte's Beast Vassal, Rhododactylos, had the ability to consume the magical power of other demons to feed itself, and also, to nullify magical energy. Even the vast power of an Old Guard such as Gigliola possessed could not breach the Divine Oscillation Effect that protected Astarte.

"A Beast Vassal coexisting with a homunculus...this Demon Sanctuary has raised quite a rare breed of doll. Certainly this is annoying...but what can you do about *this*?"

A crimson whip emerged from within Gigliola's hand. It was a long whip with thorns running all along it like the stem of a rose. This was her Beast Vassal—a so-called Intelligent Weapon.

However, she did not snap her whip at Astarte's Beast Vassal, but rather, against the ground at her own feet.

The next moment, a thunderous roar accompanied the staggering of Astarte's

Beast Vassal.

“—Astarte?!” shouted Asagi.

The rainbow-colored golem shielded Asagi as countless bullets rained down upon them.

These were large-caliber anti-materiel rifles, man-portable rockets, machine guns, and arbalests—all specially constructed anti-demon weapons firing rounds imbued with ritual energy.

Ordinary demons would have been blown away without a trace by such concentrated firepower, but Astarte’s golem withstood it.

However, even she was pinned down. The incredible fusillade had completely stopped her in her tracks.

Asagi was astonished. “Why would the Island Guard...?!”

It was not Gigliola who had attacked Astarte, but the Island Guard’s main strike force that had sortied to capture Kiliga Gilika. The guardsmen, supposedly on their side, were hitting Astarte with everything they had.

Astarte casually conveyed in a robotic monotone...

“I recommend that you flee, Miss Aiba. They are being attacked by a Beast Vassal.”

Asagi gasped and looked at Gigliola.

“Attacked...?!”

The tip of her whip was still impaling the surface of the ground. However, when Asagi looked closely, she saw that a countless number of branches had spread out like the roots of a plant, sprouting out of the ground to wrap themselves around the guardsmen’s feet.

Mogwai quickly explained the situation, its voice obvious as always.

“This ain’t good, Li’l Miss. Gigliola Ghirardi’s Beast Vassal, Rose Zombiemaker, has the ability to control minds. Looks like puttin’ all our eggs in one basket backfired on us.”

Gigliola had said she’d *taken over* the Demon Prison she’d been housed in.

The power of her Beast Vassal was to control the minds of others via a physical link, just like a parasite. The ability made her quite literally a public menace.

In one sense, her ability made her more fearsome than a vampire primogenitor. After all, it was only by fighting in groups that mankind was able to fight demons, with their overwhelming physical superiority, on even terms. However, her ability took away human beings' greatest weapon and turned it against them. Gigliola became more powerful in proportion to the number of enemies arrayed against her.

Emotionlessly, Astarte stated:

"I shall impede her progress. Please leave the vicinity with haste—"

However, Asagi could clearly hear the urgency in the sound of her voice.

Astarte's Beast Vassal, which by nature could only be defeated by the impact of greater demonic energy than its own, yet which repelled all magic attacks, was nigh invincible—yet even it had a weakness; namely, that its host, Astarte, was but a frail homunculus. Her body could not endure the summons for a long duration. Without a vampiric body of her own, she simply couldn't bear the strain of summoning a Beast Vassal for long.

Asagi pulled Sana's hand along once more.

"Sana!"

She had no idea where to go, but running was their only option.

Astarte couldn't strike back against the Island Guard. As long as Asagi and Sana remained there, all Astarte could do was shield them for however long she could last.

However, Gigliola watched them turn tail with a pitying look.

"*Fu-fu...* I'm so sorry, did you really think an Old Guard vampire would be served by only one Beast Vassal?"

This said, she raised her left hand high.

Fresh blood spewed from her palm, finally taking the form of a new Beast Vassal.

This was a swarm of crimson bees. There were dozens of them, each a giant some five or six centimeters long. The swarm bore down on the girls, looking like something straight out of a nightmare.

Gigliola continued her elegant laughter.

“Get them, Aguijón!”

As the swarm of bees overtook them, Asagi fell to her knees in despair. Even she was checkmated this time. Despite the aid of the supercomputer that controlled the Gigafloats, she couldn’t think of anything that’d get them out of this jam.

With Gigliola having taken over the main striking arm of the Island Guard, Astarte was at her limits. Asagi, a mere high schooler, had no power with which to repel a Beast Vassal.

“I’m sorry, Sana...”

All Asagi could do was shield the girl’s body with her own.

Sana offered a gentle, charming smile in response to Asagi’s motherly embrace.

“Don’t worry, Mama.”

As Sana whispered into her ear, Asagi’s eyes widened in surprise. Her vision was flooded with the swarm of crimson bees rushing toward them—



It was truly the very next moment that a young man's laughter, full of delight, reverberated all around them.

"The Songstress of Cuartas Theater and the valiant maiden—ha-ha-ha-ha, how lovely. Truly a performance worthy of a festival, 'tis it not?"

A torrent of magical energy so immense that it blotted out the starry sky gushed in like a beam.

Bathed in a shock wave of destruction, the swarm of crimson bees were ripped to shreds and annihilated. But the shock wave was not sound—it was actually a Beast Vassal in the form of a giant, radiant serpent.

Amid the darkness, both eyes glowing crimson, stood a handsome, blond, young man.

"By all means, do allow me to participate, Gigliola Ghirardi."

Clad in a pure white coat, he looked like a knight in shining armor come to save Asagi and Sana. However, the aura spread about him was simply too vile for the title.

The vicious smile that came over him was filled with excitement and anticipation at the coming slaughter.

The beautiful vampiress voiced the aristocratic maniac's name:

"—Dimitrie Vattler!"

An encounter between two terrifying Old Guard vampires...

The sky above the Demon Sanctuary was dyed with a surge of malevolence that seemed to melt the very air itself.

4

Kojou stared at the screen of his cell phone and made a sound of dismay in his throat.

"...No good, won't connect."

Just before the call with Asagi cut off, it sounded like someone was attacking

her and Natsuki. A fair bit of time had already passed since then.

If the pursuer was actually one of the prison barrier escapees, both girls' lives were in grave danger.

Asagi was just a high school student. Kojou didn't think she could escape unscathed from an attack by a magical criminal nasty enough to be held in the prison ward. It was even possible they'd both already been killed.

Kojou turned to the outer wall of the guesthouse and violently pounded his fist against it.

"Shit... What the hell's Natsuki doin' with Asagi in the first place?!"

The elevator felt unusually slow. He resented all these layers of security to protect the guesthouse from intruders.

Yukina, clutching her silver spear, grabbed hold of the cuff of Kojou's sleeve as she spoke.

"Perhaps it is because Asagi Aiba was at Keystone Gate?"

Kojou glanced down at her in surprise.

"Keystone Gate?"

"Yes. Ms. Minamiya teleported to get away just before her magical power was completely stolen from her. That being the case, she surely chose the safest place she could think of as her destination."

Kojou thought back to the giant, majestic structure at the center of Itogami Island.

"I see...because Keystone Gate's the HQ for the Island Guard..."

It came equipped with robust defensive systems and a large number of Attack Mages protecting it; certainly, the gate was the safest place on the island. If anything, Natsuki selecting the place as her destination was a no-brainer.

And thanks to Asagi working at the adjacent building in her part-time programming job for the Gigafloat Management Corporation, she just happened to be nearby...

"However," Yukina continued, "I believe Ms. Minamiya completely reverted in

age just before arriving at the Island Guard's staging area."

Kojou put his hand to his forehead as he remembered Asagi mentioning that the girl seemed lost and confused.

"And she was like that when she met Asagi..."

Kojou could distinctly picture in his mind how *that* must have thrown Asagi off.

"Most likely," replied Yukina with a nod.

"If even a tiny fragment of her memory remained, Ms. Minamiya would no doubt instinctively judge that she was safe with Aiba. As a result, perhaps it's like the imprinting phenomenon that happens with bird hatchlings?"

"You mean, you think the first thing you set eyes on is your mom?"

"I see," went Kojou, understanding her now. He thought that was by far the most likely possibility, whatever the truth of the matter.

However, knowing *why* the two were together didn't solve the problem whatsoever. The two remained in great peril.

Passing through the final checkpoint, Kojou and the others finally got out of the building.

Yukina looked up at Sayaka, standing right beside her, and asked..., "Sayaka, did you get in touch with the Island Guard?"

Sayaka was holding her cell phone as she shook her head.

"No good. Sounds like it's complete chaos on their end. I'm not on a formal assignment, so I can't use the Lion King Agency's priority channel. At this rate, it could take hours to get through using official channels..."

Kojou groaned as he looked up at an electronic billboard at a pedestrian bridge.

"Damn... And the monorail ain't runnin', either. If it wasn't for all the roads bein' packed from the parade...!"

The roads on the island were so congested that there was little hope of using a car. Unable to use the monorails, their only other option for getting around

was to hoof it.

Even sprinting at full speed with vampiric endurance, it'd take close to fifteen minutes to reach Keystone Gate. Kojou didn't think Asagi and Natsuki would be safe that long.

That was when Yukina tugged on Kojou's hand and shouted, "Senpai, look!"

She was pointing to a small corner store.

"A bicycle?!"

Guessing what Yukina had in mind, Kojou sprinted. There was a single bicycle stopped in front of the corner store. It was a thin-wheeled model for city riding, but it sure beat being on foot.

Yukina severed the chain lock on the bike with one swing of her silver spear.

"I'll apologize to the owner. Senpai, go! With a vampire's leg strength—"

Then, she made a tiny cut in the tip of her own index finger and put it, complete with blood flowing out of it, into Kojou's mouth.

As Kojou licked Yukina's finger, Sayaka raised her voice.

"Ah! Ahh!"

Her tone was disordered, a mix of anger and envy. But Kojou didn't have any time to worry about that.

Kojou's body kicked into overdrive in response to the taste of Yukina's blood. His true vampiric power awakened. Though the wound in his chest began to throb once more, Kojou ignored it and got on the bicycle.

"We'll come after you as soon as we can!"

"Sorry, Himeragi. I owe you one!"

Kojou pushed down on the pedals with all his vampiric strength.

The bicycle flew forward at incredible speed as if it had been launched by a rocket.

The violet-haired woman continued to clutch her crimson whip as she looked at the young vampire nobleman.

Her beautiful, sultry face revealed the tiniest bit of hesitation.

“...Dimitrie Vattler. What is a noble from the Warlord’s Empire doing here?!”

Vattler was a pureblood vampire, a direct descendant of Europe’s First Primogenitor, the Lost Warlord. Gigliola could not comprehend what a nobleman of Vattler’s stature was doing in a Demon Sanctuary in the Far East, far from the Dominion he called home.

For his part, Vattler made a refined, polite smile, as he showed complete disregard for her confusion.

“It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Gigliola Ghirardi, princess of the Chaos Bride’s tribe.”

Vattler stepped in front of Gigliola as if he was protecting Asagi and Sana. Gigliola’s glossy lips twisted malevolently.

“And you, of the Lost Warlord’s bloodline, do you intend to get in my way?”

Vattler laughed, as if waiting for Gigliola to ask precisely that.

“This is the Far East Demon Sanctuary, where our primogenitors hold no sway whatsoever. From the humans’ perspective, I, an ambassador in this land under the Holy Ground Treaty, am merely thwarting the evil deeds of a heinous criminal—a finer script could not be written. Do you not agree?”

Gigliola’s eyes made a pointed scowl as it finally dawned on her what Vattler was really after.

“I wonder, is your goal to hunt us prison barrier escapees...for sport?”

The rumors of the young, handsome aristocrat being a fearsome berserker were famous among Europe’s demonkind. It was said that Vattler, bored with the passage of immortality, sought out combat with powerful opponents, even to the point of devouring fellow vampires...*for kicks*.

No doubt, as far as Vattler was concerned, criminals fiendish enough to be housed in the prison ward were ideal prey. Having the law behind him was just the cherry on top.

“I may not appear it, but I am recovering from injury,” Vattler stated in a deadly serious tone. “I was looking for an opponent suitable for... rehabilitation.”

A thin bead of sweat rolled down Gigliola’s brow as her right hand violently cracked her whip.

“Quite a glutton you are, Master of Serpents... However, can you defeat *my* Beast Vassal, I wonder?”

In the next instant, the Island Guard troops under her control poured a hail of weapons fire upon Vattler. They numbered over 160. It was impossible for any demon to completely evade every single bullet. Besides, the weapons they were equipped with surely were powerful enough to inflict a lethal blow, even upon a vampire noble.

Regardless, Vattler’s expression did not change. He merely raised his hand and lightly snapped his fingers.

“Shakala!”

A Beast Vassal resembling a sea serpent materialized and coiled around Vattler. The monster was overwhelmingly large; the view of it was surreal—as if a skyscraper had been built to overlook a canyon.

The cruel creature’s eyes gazed down at Gigliola and the troops under her control.

As the serpent smoothly adopted an offensive posture, Gigliola’s blood ran cold.

“Are you sane, Dimitrie Vattler?! They’re merely puppets!”

Looking decidedly intrigued, Vattler’s reply had a hint of sarcasm in it.

“...Your point?”

The giant sea serpent transformed its flesh and blood into a super high-pressure stream of water as it attacked the Island Guard. The explosive force blasted the asphalt apart; the guardsmen, protected by riot shields and armored cars, were blown away like they were made of paper.

It was absurdly merciless destruction.

Asagi held her breath as she beheld the apocalyptic scene.

Even so, Vattler had apparently held back somewhat (by his standards). Of course, that was no doubt out of consideration for Asagi and Sana, not the Island Guard. The Beast Vassal he had called Shakala was capable of raising an area's pressure to tens of thousands of atmospheres, enough to boil human beings from the inside out.

"Did you intend to use them as human shields?" Vattler asked Gigliola, sounding distinctly bored. "Really, now...why would I be concerned about the lives of beings weak enough to fall prey to your control?"

The Island Guard's main strike force was virtually wiped out. That also meant Gigliola had lost her army.

"I see...," ground out the mage. "So that's the kind of vampire you are, Duke of Ardeal. Just as the rumors say."

Vattler's Beast Vassal rematerialized, circled in the sky like it was threatening to rain, and then aimed straight at her.

Watching Gigliola's lack of resistance, Vattler seemed somewhat disappointed.

"Over already? Is that all the Third Primogenitor's bloodline has to offer? I expected more."

Gigliola flicked her violet hair back and howled...

"...Oh, it's quite all right. Don't worry—I won't give you time to be disappointed!"

Her right hand grew hazy, like a mirage, and the crimson whip shot out like lightning.

Gigliola's Intelligent Weapon, her whiplike Beast Vassal, was aimed at Vattler's as it floated above her head.

In midair, the thorny, branched whip wrapped around the giant serpent's body. She was trying to gain command over it, too.

Vattler smiled thinly. "I see... So it isn't just humans that you can control, then...?"

He wasn't just smiling on the surface; it was the first time he'd revealed true delight. It was a dangerous smile that held ferocity in its shadow.

A cruel smile came over Gigliola as well.

"Know your place, Master of Serpents. Aguijón!"

The swarm of crimson bees reemerged above her head. Their numbers were far greater than before; there might have been five hundred, even a thousand; it was a vast swarm that dyed the entire sky red. Even among the Old Guard, few vampires could summon such a number of Beast Vassals.

A loud, vivid laugh erupted out of Vattler. "Ha-ha-ha-ha, that's wonderful. Fine indeed. So this is the Songstress of Cuartas Theater!"

He looked deeply delighted at a sight he was rarely privileged to see. Here he was, his Beast Vassal stolen from his control, under ferocious enemy attack—he was overjoyed that his very life was being put on the line by a prison barrier escapee, as mighty a foe as he had dared hope.

He was still laughing when the crimson bees rushed toward him. It looked like Vattler was being burned to ash by a giant flame. It was an all-out attack by Beast Vassals too numerous to count; there seemed no possible escape.

However, that moment, something like a jet-black vortex emerged above the male vampire's head. It was a gigantic vortex several dozen meters in diameter.

Gigliola's beautiful face twisted in shock.

"—Aguijón?!"

Just before the swarm of crimson bees could arrive at the young aristocrat, they vanished one after another. The jet-black vortex floating above Vattler's head simply sucked all the bees in.

"A Beast Vassal...?! It can't be?!"

By then, Gigliola had surely realized that the black vortex was really a mass of thousands of intertwined snakes. Those thousands of serpents extended their necks one after another, each taking an onrushing crimson bee into its jaws and swallowing it whole.

The new Beast Vassal that Vattler had summoned was a serpent with a

thousand heads.

“It’s been a while since I’ve faced an enemy that made me summon this one, Gigliola Ghirardi,” Vattler offered with a smirk.

His blue eyes were dyed crimson; his long, large fangs were poking out from his lips. Incredible demonic energy had welled up into his body.

Having consumed Gigliola’s Beast Vassal, he’d healed his wounds from the previous battle and regained every sliver of demonic power that he had lost.

Backed into a corner, Gigliola let loose her crimson whip toward Vattler himself.

“What...did you do...to my Beast Vassal?!”

But Vattler’s new Beast Vassal devoured her whip in midair. The countless serpents consumed the equally countless branches of the Intelligent Weapon—
—And not just the whip, but Gigliola’s hand with it.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaa—!”

Gigliola screamed as her right arm was bitten off midway. When she turned her back as if to run, the serpents assailed her, one after another. Bits and pieces of her were consumed until her entire body was dyed in vermilion.

Cannibalism—this was the true reason the vampires of Europe feared Vattler. Vattler consumed his fellow vampires and stole their power for himself.

Gigliola tried to transform her body into mist to flee, but Vattler’s other Beast Vassal stopped her. The sea serpent, able to freely manipulate atmospheric pressure, created a wall of dense air that would not permit her to escape.

“Ha-ha, so you’re still alive? That’s an Old Guard for you. Truly splendid—”

Gigliola rolled onto the ground, her body still half-solid, half-mist. Vattler’s cruel smile continued as he gazed at her helpless form.

“N-no! Stop...! Someone help me...!”

Gigliola desperately tried to escape, crawling on the ground with her left arm—her only usable limb remaining. Even the great regenerative abilities of an Old Guard vampire could not heal such grievous wounds in a short time span.

Gigliola no longer possessed the strength with which to fight.

All that awaited her now was one-sided slaughter.

“...”

In anticipation of that cruel fate, Asagi covered Sana's eyes. She couldn't let a little girl witness such a cruel, tragic sight any further.

The handsome young vampire hadn't come to save Asagi or Sana; he just wanted a fight. He'd appeared to hunt prey and then make it his own flesh and blood.

Once the slaughter was complete, there was no guarantee whatsoever he wouldn't go after Asagi or Sana.

Beyond that, the Island Guard was in tatters, and Astarte, having sustained repeated assaults from them, was already at her limit. There was no one to save Asagi.

Asagi clutched Sana in her arms and pleaded, “Someone, help me. Someone, stop him...”

The voice that responded to her call was that of a teenage boy she knew very well.

“Vattler—!”

The thick, unearthly aura that filled the night sky vanished.

The light of the moon shone down on one Kojou Akatsuki, sitting atop a bicycle that was spewing white smoke. It had been abused to the very limits of its endurance.

6

There was only one term for it: “a disaster zone.”

The road had been chewed up, the walls of buildings had been cracked, and traffic lights and lampposts were all crooked.

The Island Guard's main strike force was in ruins. And a vampiress dressed in

something like underwear was on the ground, half-alive and half-dead.

The sole saving grace was that Asagi and the little girl she was embracing were nominally unharmed.

Kojou didn't have to ask who'd done all this. It took someone like a beserker vampire to look at the tragic scene and calmly smile.

Vattler gazed at Kojou, who was all covered in sweat, and called out to him with a smile that was completely out of place.

"Hiya, Kojou."

Kojou sighed in visible exhaustion as he disposed of the bicycle he'd ridden in on.

"Like this is the place to be all casual! You totally overdid it!"

"Hmm, did I?" mused Vattler in mock dismay as he inclined his head slightly.

The woman in lingerie lying at his feet did ring a bell for Kojou, so to speak. She was one of the ones who'd busted out of the prison barrier. It looked like Vattler had counterattacked when one of the jailbreakers was assaulting Asagi and Natsuki, saving both of them as a result.

If that was in fact the case, perhaps Kojou ought to have been thanking him; but seeing the nobleman's handiwork up close, he didn't feel very thankful at all.

The gray manacle on the wounded escapee's left arm emitted a glow. After that, silver chains spewed out and wrapped her up tightly; she immediately winked out. She had returned to the prison barrier once more. Seeing this, Vattler nodded in a show of admiration.

"Oh my...the prison barrier's system activated, did it? It's been quite an amusing show, all thanks to you, Kojou. It's never boring on this island."

"Yeah, yeah..." Blowing him off with an exasperated look, Kojou rushed over to Asagi and Natsuki.

Asagi didn't have her usual arrogant leer. Her hair was a mess; her clothes were dirty and all torn up. Her eyelashes were wet with tears. Even so, she looked up at Kojou and heartily chewed him out.

“You’re late, Kojou!”

“...Sorry.”

Kojou made a strained smile at the first words out of Asagi’s mouth. He took hold of her hand and helped her to her feet.

Seeing Kojou and Asagi like that, a little girl who greatly resembled Natsuki looked up with a curious expression.

Kojou looked at the homunculus, who was sitting against a wall, and asked, “You all right, Astarte?”

The young woman stiffly turned her head and replied rather weakly, “Affirmative. However, unable to continue combat. Rest and retuning is required.”

“Got it. I’ll take it from here,” Kojou declared.

Hearing this, Astarte closed her eyes in apparent relief. She slipped into sleep mode, no doubt preserving her body temperature.

Sheesh, thought Kojou as he sighed. Asagi watched his face from the side, glaring in obvious anger.

“Take over, my butt! What is all this?! What do you know?!”

“Well, what are you doin’ together with Natsuki?!” Kojou yelled back instantly.

Asagi was a normal high schooler. She had neither the power nor the training to fight off sorcerous criminals. No one would have criticized Asagi for ditching the little girl and running for her life.

And yet, here she was, protecting a girl she didn’t know to the point of being all beat up.

She really is quite something, thought Kojou.

For her part, Natsuki’s eyes blinked hard when she heard Kojou’s words.

“What do you mean...with Natsuki? Wait, you mean Sana?”

“Sana...?”

“Yeah. ‘Small Natsuki.’ Abbreviated to Sana.”

“Ahh...”

So that’s what happened, Kojou realized. It wasn’t a big surprise Asagi had noticed the little girl’s resemblance to Natsuki. The kid seemed to genuinely have amnesia, so calling her by some other name while in that state seemed like a pretty good idea...

And Vattler, listening to their exchange of words, murmured as he realized it for himself. “Natsuki Minamiya...I see. So the escapees aim to eliminate the Witch of the Void?”

He gave Sana a sly look.

Kojou girded himself, ready to shield the two. “Vattler...why you...”

Natsuki Minamiya, an exceptional Attack Mage, was one of the precious few mighty foes Vattler recognized as among his equals. Now Natsuki had lost her memory and magical power and was trapped in the form of a (very) little girl. Kojou could scarcely imagine just what Vattler might do, armed with such knowledge.

Put bluntly, if Natsuki died here, the prison barrier would completely vanish and the prisoners within would be completely freed. And Vattler was well aware of that fact.

If Vattler tried to kill Natsuki then and there, Kojou *had* to stop him.

In other words, Kojou had to fight him.

Wounded by Snowdrift Wolf as he was, Kojou had no guarantee he could win against Vattler; still, he had no choice but to try, even if it meant exposing his being a vampire to Asagi...

But—

Vattler suddenly burst into laughter, as if to mock the hardened determination on Kojou’s face.

“Ha-ha...ha-ha-ha-ha-ha...ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

It was a huge burst of genuine laughter that seemed to come from a different

person.

He put both his arms over his belly and bent over, like he was laughing so hard that it actually hurt.

Here was a frightening noble from the Warlord's Empire, an Old Guard vampire, overcome with mirth. Apparently seeing Natsuki like that was simply too far beyond all his expectations.

"Oh my, just *look* at you. Not even a shadow of yourself, Witch of the Void—ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Kojou called out to him with a bewildered look.

"Uh...Vattler...?"

Hostility, he expected, but laughter was way outside what he'd been prepared for. Kojou really had no idea how to deal with the guy at that moment.

Vattler wiped tears from the corners of his eyes as he asked, "From the looks of it, you're wounded, Kojou. Can you really protect her in that state?"

He looked like he was still holding back a few more chuckles.

"What are you tryin' to say?" Kojou growled.

Absolutely, Kojou was wounded at that moment, unable to fully employ the power of the Fourth Primogenitor. Put bluntly, he didn't feel safe even fighting the surviving escapees.

However, the Island Guard's main strike force was already flat on its back. Even if it was beyond him, Kojou had to try.

As if seeing right through Kojou, Vattler stated with a buoyant tone:

"I shall grant her the use of my ship."

"...Huh?"

"Of course, you can come with her. I'm sure it'll be more fun that way."

Vattler's unexpected suggestion left Kojou at a loss for words.

But he immediately divined Vattler's true intent. After all, the prison barrier escapees were after Natsuki's life. Sparing Natsuki meant that they'd come

running all on their own.

To Vattler, a man who craved battle with mighty opponents, you couldn't ask for a better situation.

"If the escapees are coming for her, they will most certainly attack. If it's here in the city, civilians might become collateral damage. It's much safer my way, don't you think?"

"So you're sayin' you'll protect Natsuki...huh?"

Kojou bit his lip and sank into thought. It wasn't as if he intended to trust Vattler, but he felt that it wasn't a bad deal, strings attached notwithstanding.

Surely even the jailbreakers wouldn't be able to challenge a Warlord's Empire noble so lightly. That'd buy them time to find a way to get Natsuki's memories back.

The problem was, if the escapees really did take Vattler on, it was entirely possible Itogami Island would suffer massive damage next time, but even so—

Kojou sighed.

"...Got it. You have a deal."

It wasn't like he had any other choice in the matter. In the worst case, Kojou would be right by Natsuki's side; that way, some way to deal with the situation ought to present itself.

Vattler narrowed his eyes, delighted, and gave a satisfied nod. He looked something like a middle school boy who'd succeeded in inviting his unrequited love to visit his house.

Maybe I spoke too soon, thought Kojou in anguish as he felt a chill run up his spine.

"Hah?! Wait, where do you get off deciding that, Kojou?! And how the hell do you know a Warlord's Empire noble, anyway?!"

With Asagi's hostility backing him into a corner, Kojou desperately tried to paper things over.

"There's a lot of circumstances involved. I'll explain it all in detail later, so

please, just—”

Asagi heaved a great sigh, as if exasperated to the depths of her soul.

“And do you really think I’m gonna just let this go?”

Kojou slumped his shoulders.

“...Guess not.”

In the first place, Kojou had never thought he could pull the wool over Asagi’s eyes forever; her intuition was too good. Maybe this was when the jig would be up.

Maybe this was the right time to tell her that he’d become a vampire. To tell her that he’d become the Fourth Primogenitor. And to tell her that what was to come was no place for a normal human being like her, and thereby blow her off. No biggie. No biggie at all.

But if it meant keeping her safe, even if it meant losing her as a friend as the price—

But before Kojou could say any of that, Asagi pointed at him and declared with great fanfare, “Fine, then, I’ll put Sana in your care under *one* condition.”

Kojou had a very bad feeling about this.

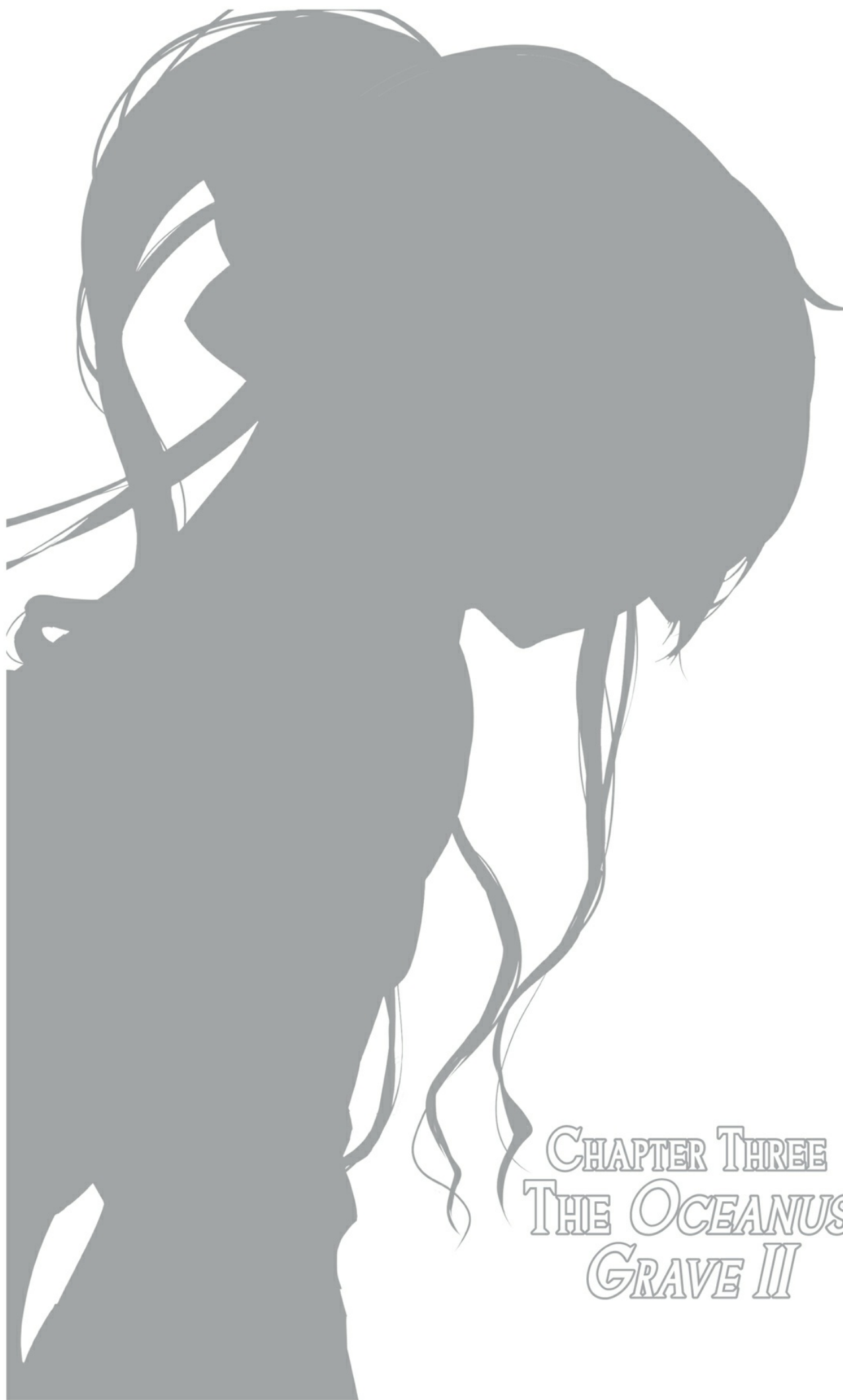
“...Condition?”

Asagi bared her teeth as she hugged Sana to her. “If you’re going, I’m going with you.”

What?!

Kojou looked to the sky in despair. Vattler started laughing again.

The night wore on. The Hollow Eve Festival, the celebration of monster encountering man, continued on.



CHAPTER THREE
THE OCEANUS
GRAVE III

CHAPTER THREE

THE OCEANUS GRAVE II

1

A strange feeling assailed him the instant he set foot in the building.

The world changed color as if he were hallucinating. The air dried out, feeling rough against his skin. It was unpleasant, but to him, the atmosphere was somehow nostalgic, too.

Saikai Private Academy High School was rare among educational institutions in the Demon Sanctuary, for the campus did not have any special facilities for demonic research. It was a normal, mundane high school. Even so, there was a strange presence swirling on the school grounds.

Here deep at night, the campus held no sign of the students; emergency lamps and the light of the moon dimly lit the various corridors.

The empty classrooms had densely packed characters written on the blackboards. These were spells, written in magic symbols from a foreign land. They were verses from an ancient grimoire.

The countless symbols written chokingly close gave off a pale, golden light as they emitted a surge of powerful magical energy. They formed a gateway through which power entered from another world.

The young man smiled faintly, charmingly, as he muttered to no one in particular.

“...The Black Bible...”

His glasses added to the air of education and intelligence. There was a gray manacle on his left forearm with a short, severed chain dangling from it. He was one of the seven escapees from the prison barrier. He was the man Schtola D

had addressed as Meiga.

The young man's quiet footsteps echoed as he walked up the stairs; his feet only halted when silhouettes that had fallen in the corridor piqued his interest.

They were the corpses of sorcerers, cut by a giant sword.

The fallen possessed jeweled daggers, wands, and grimoires—all magical weapons possessing substantial power. However, there was no longer any glow of magical power from them; they had been turned into useless junk.

The bizarre atmosphere filling the school grounds had robbed them of their enchantments.

“Are these LCO sorcerers?” the young man asked as he turned toward the center of the room.

Hearing his voice, a young woman wearing a black-and-white ceremonial robe turned around.

It was Aya Tokoyogi, the Witch of the Notaria...

She was gripping a short piece of chalk in her hand, which she had been using to copy a verse from a grimoire onto the blackboard behind her. The characters were painfully small.

Enigmatically, Aya took in the young man, asking thoughtfully, “...An escapee from the prison ward...yes? You are the one called Meiga?”

“I am a mere Attack Mage dropout. My name is not very important.”

As the young man smiled sociably at her, the smile Aya returned was tinged with a bloodlust-filled glare.

“...Quite the words for someone who entered my world unscathed.”

The young man let Aya's hostile gaze roll off him as he raised his left arm before his eyes.

“What happened to your manacle, Aya Tokoyogi?”

“...What are you referring to?”

“If you have stolen Natsuki Minamiya's memories, surely the key to the prison barrier—the program to decode it—came included. Even though Natsuki

Minamiya escaped, you did not pursue her...because you didn't need to, did you?"

The young man spoke as he looked at the witch's left arm. Hidden under the sleeve of her ceremonial robe, her wrist did not have a manacle on it as it should have. Aya Tokoyogi was already completely free of the prison barrier.

However, she hadn't informed the other prisoners that she had the key in her possession. Thanks to that, the other jailbreakers—with the exception of the young man—were pursuing Natsuki Minamiya that very moment. She'd used Natsuki as a decoy.

However, even having this pointed out only earned a mocking laugh from Aya.

"And what of it? Have you come to be handed a sliver of the decoding program, Hell Wolf?"

The young man sighed and shook his head. It seemed he did not like the odd moniker.

"...No. I already have some idea of how to remove this, you see."

Suspicion crept over Aya's face. "Then why are you here?"

"I simply wanted to see for myself."

"...See?"

"Yes, what in the world you have been doing while we escapees are being distracted by Natsuki Minamiya."

This said, the young man stepped lightly upon the jeweled dagger that had fallen before him. The dagger, which ought to have been imbued with a powerful enchantment, broke apart with ease, sounding almost like a twig being snapped.

"So this is the power of the Black Bible?"

"Correct," Aya said with a nod, her gaze drifting to the chalk she was holding.

"The Black Bible itself has already been lost. Natsuki Minamiya burned the book... What is written here is merely the knowledge of sorcery that existed in her memories."

An amused note escaped the young man's throat.

"So you stole her memories so that you could recreate the Black Bible like this...? I see, that is why you are called the Witch of the Notaria..."

He smiled as he looked over the text on the chalkboard.

The books of power known as grimoires were collections of sorcery-related knowledge and spells that had taken on a life of their own and become powerful magic themselves. These magical devices, in book form, granted power beyond human comprehension to the reader at the cost of courting great disaster.

Aya's special ability, and why she was called the Witch of the Notaria, was to copy these grimoires. What she wrote were not simple copies of the text; she completely recreated the magical power and dark spells of the original tome she worked from.

And she had brought the Black Bible, the most abominable of all grimoires, back to life from Natsuki Minamiya's memories. Each character Aya wrote on the blackboards around the room became part of a new grimoire, emitting vast magical energy in their own right. No doubt normal human beings would no longer be able to look directly at the blackboards, even if they could touch them; the entire Saikai Academy campus had been turned into a new Black Bible.

Aya glared at the young man. "Do you intend to interfere as well?"

Behind her, the air wavered as a shadowy knight encased in black armor floated up. It drew its giant sword and thrust the tip forward until it was right before the young man's eyes.

Her conversation partner calmly grabbed the tip of the sword pointed at him with his bare hand.

"No, I merely find your experiment to be unexpectedly valuable."

As he finished speaking, the black knight's form warped, as if it was turning blurry.

The young man had done nothing more than give it a light touch. That was

enough to warp the very being of the witch's Guardian. Aya scowled in annoyance as she pulled the black knight back.

"I see. You...you are the Lion King Agency's..."

Aya's black gaze narrowed as she looked at the face that the young man hid behind his glasses.

The youth turned his back on the witch, leaving himself defenseless. And then he walked straight out of the classroom.

"I pray for the success of your experiment, Aya Tokoyogi. May you find the festival a pleasant one..."

Those words were all the young man left behind as he entered the darkness and vanished.

Left behind, Aya crushed the chalk she'd been gripping in a fit of pique. She used the white dust left on her fingers to write symbols on the blackboard—the final characters that made the Black Bible complete.

Having been made whole, the Black Bible activated.

Her world began to encroach upon the world beyond.

The berobed witch let out a piercing laugh, as if she was a harbinger of death itself.

The people of the Demon Sanctuary had not realized that their destruction had begun at that very moment...

2

The ship was moored in the calm waters of the expansive wharf known as Island East.

Even among the many large ships docked at Itogami Island, this was an extravagant vessel that stole glances from everyone.

It was a private ocean cruise liner—a megayacht with tonnage rivaling a military destroyer.

Standing still inside the ship and feeling distinctly uncomfortable, Kojou Akatsuki gripped his cell phone.

It was Yukina on the other end.

“Ah? The Oceanus Grave II...you say?”

Having lost contact with Kojou when he went to save Asagi, Yukina called him out of concern, from a phone booth near Keystone Gate.

And when Kojou relayed to her his current location, there was an unconcealed echo of anger mixed in.

“You mean, the Duke of Ardeal’s megayacht? What are you doing there, senpai?”

“Well, it kinda...ended up this way.”

The displeasure in Yukina’s voice only grew.

“Excuse me?”

Apparently, signs of combat with the jailbreakers were still fresh all around Keystone Gate, which was where she and Sayaka currently were. Even over the phone, Kojou could clearly hear the sirens of ambulances carrying injured guardsmen, various people shrieking, and officers yelling orders for onlookers to disperse.

No doubt Yukina and Sayaka had both been furiously trying to find Kojou and the rest.

Small wonder Yukina was upset when Kojou and the others turned out to be leisurely spending time on an extravagant cruise ship; though, from Kojou’s point of view, being with Vattler was more than enough to keep his heart far from peaceful.

Sayaka apparently grabbed the receiver from Yukina and butted into the conversation.

“Kojou Akatsuki, do you even understand what you’ve done? The Duke of Ardeal’s ship has diplomatic immunity so Yukina and I can’t set one foot on it! Why did you bring the Witch of the Void to a place like that? Are you a moron? Do you want to be turned to ash?!”

Kojou found himself scowling at the upbraiding.

"I couldn't help it! That nut ball wants to use Natsuki as a decoy to draw the convicts out. The way it was goin', I thought it was a hell of a lot safer if they throw down over the water rather than in the middle of the city."

"Well, I suppose you do have a point there, but..."

Sayaka grudgingly agreed, though marked dissatisfaction remained in her tone.

Apparently, she'd tentatively accepted that there was a decent amount of logic backing Kojou's judgment for once.

There were still a number of escaped prisoners after Natsuki. If they fought Vattler in the middle of the city, Kojou couldn't even dream of how much damage would be inflicted around them. That being the case, surely the damage would be minimized if they tangled over the water instead.

He heard Yukina's voice from the phone once more.

"So Aiba and Ms. Minamiya are both all right?"

Well, sorta? replied Kojou in his mind, a bad taste in his mouth.

"Um, they don't look *too* beat up to me," he continued aloud. "I'm not sure I can really describe how Natsuki is right now as *all right*, though..."

Yukina sighed weakly. *"I suppose not..."*

She had seen for herself on TV that Natsuki had been turned into a preschooler.

"I think that...it's best if you at least send Aiba back to her own residence. After all, if she stays there, she'll be wrapped up in fighting for certain."

"I agree with you one hundred percent about that," Kojou muttered bitterly. "But she just ain't listenin' to me. She's more stubborn than she looks. She's totally fallen for Sana, too..."

Yukina fell into a silent, dubious pause.

"Sana...you say?"

"Her nickname for 'Small Natsuki.'"

“Ahhh...” Yukina exhaled, seemingly ready to fully accept that for some reason. But her tone of voice immediately turned to unease. *“Anyway, Sayaka and I will get as close to you as possible. Please do not create even more difficulties.”*

“Whaddaya mean...difficulties?”

“Like, ah...getting vampiric urges in front of Aiba and assaulting her...”

“Like hell I will! There’s a little girl watchin’!”

“I certainly hope that will stay the case.”

Yukina seemed worried down to her final word as she cut off the call. Kojou stuffed his cell phone back in his pocket and leaned against a nearby wall, exhausted. And then...

“Who were you calling?” Asagi asked.

“Uwaa?!”

Kojou blurted out a shout as he turned toward Asagi and Sana, having never realized they were standing right there.

“A-Asagi?! Weren’t you changin’ clothes? Vattler said the maids would give you somethin’ to wear?” Kojou rambled, a desperate attempt to change the subject.

Asagi and Sana were still in the ripped, dirtied clothes from when the jailbreakers had assaulted them.

Ah, this? Asagi seemed to say, as she lifted up the sleeve of her muddy shirt.

“They said they’re preparing a bath.” She shrugged.

“Bath?”

“They said there’s a big bath here on the ship. Vattler sure doesn’t do half measures. That’s a lord for you... He’s seriously loaded.”

Asagi spoke with visible admiration as she looked around the showy interior of the ship.

“I suppose he is,” Kojou agreed. He kept forgetting, due to the guy’s personality, but he was a nobleman from the Warlord’s Empire—a lord of high

standing. He'd normally be wined and dined as a guest of the state.

Asagi drew close to Kojou and peered up at him as she asked, "So, Kojou, why do *you* know someone like that?"

Kojou averted his eyes without thinking.

"Well, ah, we have similar physical condi... Er, we have some common issues, you see."

Asagi's half-lidded eyes drew even closer to Kojou.

"Oh, *really*...?"

Before Kojou knew it, he'd been backed up against the wall, with Asagi's thorny gaze silently piercing him. Apparently, half-baked excuses weren't going to cut it here.

"You know, Kojou...lately, when I talk to you, it feels like you're trying to hide something from me, and sometimes it *really* ticks me off..."

Kojou suddenly felt extremely guilty as he listened to her honesty. Excuses weren't going to cut it, precisely because Kojou *was* hiding something from her. But Asagi made a light shrug of her shoulders that said, *Well, whatever*, easily letting Kojou slip the noose.

"Anyway, I'll drop it until after the bath. But after that, you're gonna fess up to *everything* this time. Let's go, Sana."

Asagi walked off toward the facilities, preschool Natsuki's hand in tow. Kojou watched her back disappear before exhaling deeply.

He was grateful for the time to put his feelings in order, but put another way, it might well have been Asagi's ultimatum. It seemed Kojou's continued attempts to hide the truth about himself from her had reached their limit.

Besides, it felt like there would be nowhere to hide from Asagi tonight—she was especially suspicious of Vattler being an acquaintance of his, apparently. Kojou still had no idea why she was so nervous about *that* part when *she* was the one who came on board, already well aware of the danger.

Well, Vattler was dangerous either way, so Asagi's wariness of him was a good thing—or at least, that was the harmless conclusion Kojou forced himself

to accept.

As he thought this, Kojou suddenly lifted his head. Someone unknown to him was approaching, as if replacing his departed companions.

It was a young man wearing a silver-colored tuxedo. Appearance-wise, he was fifteen or sixteen-ish. He was small in stature and had a gentle look to his face, making him quite the pretty boy.

His hair was gray; his eyes were jade green. His eyelashes were long. Maybe that's why he had a fragile air about him that stirred Kojou's protective instincts, even though he was of the same gender.

During the time his chiseled facial features had stolen Kojou's eyes, he asked, "Akatsuki, is it not?"

Having his name called by the youth's voice, which apparently hadn't broken yet, finally brought Kojou back to his senses.

"Er, and you are?"

"I am named Kira Lebedev Voltisvala of the Lost Warlord's bloodline. I apologize for not having introduced myself to the lord of the Far East Demon Sanctuary sooner; I ask that you forgive me, Fourth Primogenitor."

The boy calling himself Kira flashed a beautiful, charming smile, even within his reverence.

"It ain't like this is my territory, so you didn't really have to come and say hi... But anyway, nice to meet you. Ah, you can call me Kojou."

Upon saying this, Kojou gave Kira a friendly smile. Being of the Lost Warlord's bloodline meant that he was probably a Warlord's Empire aristocrat, just like Vattler. Even if they were the same age—at least outwardly—Kojou wasn't quite comfortable being spoken to with such stuffy, polite language.

"...As I might have expected," Kira murmured in awe, his gaze moving up Kojou's form. "You are indeed a frightening man, ruling the populace from the darkness through fear and chaos rather than through overt displays of might... I am deeply moved."

"Uh, no, it's not like that at all... Really."

As Kira gave him a look of pure admiration, Kojou quietly sighed.

Apparently, Vattler had given the boy an obviously mistaken impression of Kojou. Kira seemed completely unaware of the fact he was being toyed with. *Probably has one of them super-serious personalities*, Kojou thought, pitying the lad. He thought the newcomer resembled Yukina somewhat, in that respect.

“So, whaddaya want with me, anyway?”

Kira conveyed his business with Kojou in fluent Japanese, almost *too* fluent—

“Yes, if I may be so bold, we have prepared a change of attire. If it pleases you to cleanse yourself first, then—”

Apparently, they’d arranged clothes for Kojou to change into.

“‘Cleanser’...? You mean take a bath, right?”

For some reason, Kira turned bashful then, even as he shot a small, wry smile in Kojou’s direction.

“Yes. Though the sight of you covered in blood does have a certain...ferocious charm to it.”

Kojou was a bit thrown off by the faint throb that came to his chest. *Hey, hold on here, the cute face might be throwin’ ya off a bit, but this is a dude. Definitely a dude.*

“Ha! ’S not for me. But I’d be grateful for a bath. You’ll show me where it is?”

“Yes, if it is not a bother to you, Master Kojou.”

“Of course, it ain’t a bother. This ship’s so huge, I’d probably get lost on my own.”

Kira gave another bow of acknowledgment before walking ahead. Kojou tried to follow in his footsteps when the stab-like gaze he felt from behind him made his feet go still.

A young man Kojou didn’t recognize was standing at the top of a flight of stairs, looking down at Kojou.

He was probably the same generation as Kojou. His height was pretty much the same, too. He was wearing a silver tuxedo very similar to Kira’s, but the

antagonistic air that enveloped him gave off a completely different impression. The young man's face was very handsome, reminiscent of a cold steel blade. Hostility was plain on his face as he glared at Kojou.

"Who's that?"

Kira looked conflicted as he replied to Kojou's question.

"Tobias—Lord Tobias Jagan. He, too, is a noble of the Warlord's Empire, but —"

"Uh...have I done somethin' to get on his bad side?"

"No... It's not that," Kira replied quietly. "It may be, ah...jealousy."

"Jealousy...?"

For some reason, Kira's cheeks reddened as he spoke, and he lowered his eyes with an even more conflicted look.

"Yes. After all, Duke Ardeal is always paying great attention to Master Kojou, so..."

The hell, thought Kojou in bewilderment. Yeah, Vattler had "sworn his undying love" to Kojou or some stupid thing like that, but that was purely his lust for the powerful blood of the Fourth Primogenitor. Surely that was no reason for this man to view him as an enemy. That said, if he indeed was "jealous" of Kojou even so, that must mean—

As Kojou considered the question with great and earnest intensity, he felt a strange chill up his spine.

"...Sorry. I'm gonna pretend I didn't hear a word of that," he muttered weakly.

Tobias Jagan continued to glare at Kojou and Kira without a word for as long as he was within view.

3

Kojou, wearing a sauna towel, sighed with admiration as he took stock of his surroundings.

“This bath ain’t big—it’s *huge*.”

Though not as large as a Japanese hot spring bathhouse might have been, it was such a fine bath that it almost made you forget you were on a ship. The water level was somewhat shallow, but you could fit ten people in with room to spare.

Even without the pompous ornamentation, the pure white covering the bathroom conveyed an air of high society. It wasn’t hard for Kojou to imagine a rich man in the tub, surrounded by young, doting lovers.

Thanks to indulging in such thoughts of excess, Kojou immediately imagined Vattler there, served by Kira and Tobias...and promptly went into meltdown. He suffered a surprising amount of mental damage from the image.

Even so, Kojou was pretty grateful for the chance to wash the grime away. His entire body was a mess from the sweat and blood from multiple bouts of combat.

Kojou had his own blood caked on him, and Yuuma’s too from when he was carrying her—

“...Yuuma...wait for me,” Kojou whispered to himself, as he scrubbed at the dried blood, losing it under heavy soap lather.

The image of his childhood friend, wounded and in tatters, sent pain through his chest.

Even if it wasn’t a race against the clock, that still left Yuuma hovering on death’s door. To save her, they needed to first save Natsuki, but Natsuki had lost her magical power and had the escapees after her, too.

He was worried that Aya Tokoyogi was nowhere to be found, as well. Plus, he had no idea when or where Vattler would run amok as he pleased. Kojou’s brain capacity was close to overload from the sheer number of problems. Even so, there was no way he was going to cut and run with Yuuma’s life on the line.

Calm down, Kojou thought, taking several deep breaths. It was precisely at times like these that he couldn’t just shove it all out of his mind. First, he needed to calm down and deal with the problems one by one, or—

Before Kojou could finish that unusually serious thought—

“Is the temperature of the bath to your liking, Fourth Primogenitor?” asked a girl’s voice.

“Uwah?!”

The sudden presence behind him ripped Kojou’s inner calm to tatters.

With a patter of bare feet, some unfamiliar young girls came into the bathroom.

There were five of them, each wearing a different color swimsuit. Their ages ran from the low teens to mid-twenties. They seemed like a bunch of sisters who got along well, but their races and body types had nothing in common. The only commonality was that they were all really good-looking. Each had a beauty to her like she’d been born to high society.

Of course, the bare-naked Kojou hastily wrapped a towel around his loins and stood up.

“Wh-what the heck?”

The beautiful brigade of girls in swimsuits surrounded him without mercy.

A blond woman, twenty years old give or take, leaned in close to Kojou as she spoke.

“We are a maid troop serving the Duke of Ardeal. We thought that we would wash your back.”

She had a red hibiscus bikini covering her glamorous body.

“Nah, it’s all right, you don’t need to wash my back or anything...”

Kojou had no idea whatsoever why Vattler’s maids had trespassed upon the bathroom.

“The front, then?” she countered.

“Not the front, either! And takin’ care of someone in the bath ain’t a maid’s job anyway, is it?!”

The oldest and tallest of them, appearing reserved and ladylike in her blue swimsuit, replied to Kojou gently.

“...I see that the cat is indeed out of the bag.”

Kojou mentally dubbed her Bikini Blue.

“Out of...the bag?”

“Actually, we’re not maids at all, see,” said Red.

“Huh?”

A brown-skinned girl spoke with a tone of indifference.

“We’re hostages, actually.”

She had a rather young-looking visage and a yellow swimsuit. The swimsuit design had a sporty feel to it, matching her young physique.

“...Hostages?”

Bikini White replied first.

“Yes. We are the daughters of royals and high officials from countries bordering the Warlord’s Empire, including a few princesses from countries the Duke of Ardeal personally destroyed... The bottom line is, we were sold to him in exchange for the preservation of our native lands.”

Bikini Black added, “The saving grace is the fact Duke Ardeal swings *that* way, so he’s let us pretty much do as we please. He doesn’t seem to have any interest in women, you see...”

The latter two each whispered into one of Kojou’s ears. They were the closest to Kojou in age, as well, which only magnified his embarrassment.

The blond beauty in the red bikini put her hands on her hips and thrust her chest out with pride.

“So, we figured we’d climb up in the world here and get revenge on the motherlands that sold us out.”

The sudden, fierce dryness in Kojou’s throat made him nervous.

The predestined flaw of being a vampire was that lust awakened one’s vampiric urges. A vampire in the throes of such urges lost himself until he had tasted someone’s blood. Being seduced by a small army of swimsuit-wearing beauties with faces in the same league as gravure idols was more than

destructive enough to stimulate Kojou's brand of said urges. Getting sucked into their pace would be very dangerous.

Kojou averted his eyes from the girls and asked in as serious a voice as he could muster, "Climb up in the world?"

Bikini Red pressed a hand to Kojou's chest, as if trying to wreck all of his desperate efforts.

"Yes, such as by bearing the Fourth Primogenitor's children."

Kojou fiercely cleared his throat.

Black and White shot Kojou smoky looks from the left and right.

"The possibility is quite strong that a direct descendant of the Fourth Primogenitor would be a vampire surpassing Duke Ardeal in power," said Black.

"Or we could drink the blood of a primogenitor and become Blood Vassals ourselves—" White pointed out.

"...So, how 'bout you give me a shot?" said Red, standing right before Kojou and pointing to herself. Kojou was in shock at how overly blunt her statement was.

A Blood Vassal was a pseudo-vampire; they could only be created through vampiric contract by first-generation vampires. They were said to possess combat capability sometimes surpassing that of pureblood vampires and lived with their masters for eternity.

The girls' objective seemed to be to become Kojou's Blood Vassals and to gain combat power on par with the Fourth Primogenitor himself. Kojou actually felt relieved that their behavior to this point was coldly calculated and not based solely on sexual desire.

Perhaps thinking she might have come on to Kojou too strongly, Red suddenly lowered her eyes shyly.

"Ah, but it's our first time, so please be gentle..."

She began to cuddle against him when Kojou shook his head, trying to brush her off.

“I’m not doin’ anythin’ to anybody!”

The youngest girl, the one in the yellow swimsuit, uneasily looked at him with upturned, moist eyes.

“...You don’t like us?”

In the first place, Kojou thought laying a hand on a girl like that was a crime in and of itself.

“No, that’s really not it at all—”

As Kojou sighed and stroked his wet hair back, his eyes rose as something suddenly nagged at him. How did these girls know that Kojou was entering the bath to begin with...?

“Wait, did Vattler put you up to this? Did he order you to come seduce me?”

Kojou’s question, aired in a low voice, made every face of the pretty girl brigade stiffen.

If the girls were acting on Vattler’s orders, Kojou could easily understand why they were after him while he was bathing. Siccing them on Kojou to alleviate his boredom seemed like exactly the kind of thing Vattler would do.

Bikini Black turned away to flee from Kojou’s suspicious glare.

“Er...it was not an order, more like, our interests coincide...?”

White excused herself with an awkward but charming smile.

“Right, right. And it’s totally true that we’re hostages.”

Kojou had no sense that the girls were lying to him. So, at the very least, the girls had entered the huge bathroom of their own volition. That didn’t change that Vattler had prompted them to do so, but—

“...Why does he want me to drink blood that badly, anyway?”

The lady in the blue bikini replied to Kojou’s murmur seriously.

“I truly wonder. It feels like he’s waiting for something, though...”

“Waiting?”

“Yes. It is as if he seeks the power to fight something more dangerous than a

primogenitor—”

Kojou gasped.

On the one hand, you had the Nalakuvera that terrorists brought back to life; on the other, Kensei Kanase’s Faux-Angel—either way, Vattler had displayed interest in weapons that had the potential to surpass a primogenitor in combat capability. And Kojou, the Fourth Primogenitor—the World’s Mightiest Vampire—certainly qualified as a being in possession of power “greater than a primogenitor.” It might have been mere coincidence, but it oddly added up.

Though given the kind of man Vattler was, he might have simply wanted to play with a powerful opponent...

Red had the last word as the girls left the bath:

“Well, since that’s how it is, call us anytime if you change your mind about this. We’ll let *her* take over for today...”

Kojou reddened as he heard conversational lines like “He’s cuter than I expected” and “For sure!” from the changing room. He felt very tired as he curled up into a defensive ball.

He’d barely kept his vampiric impulses under control, but his heart was beating strongly even then. He wasn’t in any condition for thinking about things rationally.

But deciding that he could leisurely immerse himself in the bath in the meantime, Kojou unfolded and began walking toward it. But as he did so, he suddenly recalled the brigade’s final words.

“‘Let *her* take over’...? Who?”

As Kojou stopped to consider, his ears picked up the sound of new footsteps approaching from the changing room. What came next was a familiar voice.

“—Wait, Sana! Watch out, the floor’s wet!”

“Eh...?” echoed Kojou.

Two human silhouettes emerged from the opposite side of the white steam. One was a very small girl with a bath towel covering virtually her entire body. The other was a high school girl with gorgeous facial features.

Noticing Kojou's presence, Asagi stopped then and there in obvious surprise.

"Eh?!"

Her eyes opened wide as she stood stiffly, gazing dumbfounded at Kojou.

For a time, both of them gazed at each other without a word; then, they raised two great shouts of horror simultaneously.

4

Kojou muttered incoherently as he sank into the shallow Turkish bath.

"A-Asagi, why are you...?"

Asagi sat down, but with her back facing his.

"K-Kojou, why are *you* here?!"

With both of them diving into the water to hide their bodies, neither were in any position to leave.

For her part, Sana was enjoying herself, swimming in the bathwater, perhaps excited to be in such a wide bath for once.

It was then that Kojou realized there were changing room doors to both the left and right. "So, uh, maybe this is a...mixed bath? And it's only the entrances that are different for guys and girls?"

He'd never expected a ship flying the flag of the Warlord's Empire to have been built like *that*.

Kojou had no doubt that Vattler, well aware of this from the beginning, had kept quiet on purpose. *That bastard*, Kojou thought as he silently shook his fist.

Asagi asked meekly, "Um, d-did you...see?"

Kojou's reply was not, however, the innocent *See what?*

"N-nah, not at all. Was just one second."

"Th-that so."

Kojou and Asagi laughed politely, dry and stiff, at the same time. As if on

purpose, the bathroom echoed their voices off its walls, after which only an uncomfortable silence remained.

As the silent pause continued, Kojou heard a *plop*, like something was sinking down.

Kojou and Asagi traded glances with a questioning look when each suddenly went pale. In the instant they'd taken her eyes off her, Sana's body had sunk to the bottom of the bath. The only thing on the surface of the water was a few small bubbles.

"H-hey?!" shouted Kojou.

"S-Sana?!" cried Asagi.

They both rose up in surprise, rushing over to the sunken girl.

However, in contrast to Kojou and Asagi's nervousness, Sana, leisurely swimming in the bath, poked her head above the water's surface like nothing had happened. Then, she began to dog paddle around once more. The splash back made the rose petals on the water's surface sway.



“Sh-she was just divin’, huh...?” Kojou mused.

“Good grief,” replied Asagi.

Patting their chests in relief, Kojou and Asagi met each other’s eyes.

They both immediately yelped and hastily sank their important parts back below the waterline.

Even with bath towels wrapped over their bodies, it was a little too stimulating at such extremely close range.

Asagi’s back and shoulders were still exposed, however; the bath towel, drenched with hot bathwater, hugged the contours of her body. Just being in the same bath with a female classmate was an abnormal situation to begin with; Kojou’s nerves weren’t going to hold up to this.

Without any other choice, Kojou hardened his resolve and declared, “I’m gonna get out first, then. Sorry, could you close your eyes for a bit?”

But just as Kojou tried to get up, Asagi grabbed his hand and pulled strongly.

“Wait!”

“Wh-whoa—?! ”

His balance wrecked, Kojou flopped into the bath with great force. As a result, the two of them were now all over each other. And as if in complete defiance, Asagi peered straight into Kojou’s eyes.

“This is a great opportunity, so how about you tell me right here, right now, exactly what you’ve been hiding from me?”

“Asagi...”

Attacked in so many unexpected ways, the inside of Kojou’s head was already completely blank.

He didn’t have anything left for coming up with an excuse. The only answers he had to her questions now were the literal truth. No doubt Asagi was well aware of that and thought she could interrogate him like this.

Looking like she had briefly sunk into thought, Asagi took a deep breath and voiced her question.

“Kojou, do you.....like men?”

“...Huh?”

As Asagi awaited his reply with bated breath, Kojou stared back at her with a stupid look on his face. For a while, what she had asked him just wasn't sinking into his brain.

“Wait a minute?! Where'd you get *that* idea?!”

Asagi's cheeks burned red as she elaborated:

“I—I mean, I can't think of any other reason you'd be buddy-buddy with a noble from the Warlord's Empire! I mean, that guy is quite the pretty boy...”

Kojou wondered if this had been the burning question that she'd been agonizing over since before. *This* was the cause of her uncharacteristic nervousness—?

Kojou rubbed both of his arms as if feeling a chill. In all seriousness, he replied, “Even if it's a joke, just stop... You're givin' me goose bumps here...”

However, Asagi's lips pursed slightly, even so. “Yuuma's got that boyish feeling going for her, too...”

“Er, Yuuma's been my pal since we were little kids. Like or dislike ain't the issue there.”

“It—it's like you're not interested in my body, though...”

The unexpected observation made Kojou grimace. “Hahh? Who the heck told you *that*?”

Perhaps it was Asagi's surprise at just how vividly he'd taken the bait that made Asagi's hands grasp the edge of her bath towel, holding the closure in front of her chest as her eyes twinkled.

“Wanna see?”

Even as Kojou anguished over why she was making him confess something so embarrassing in regard to her, his reply was rather blunt.

“W...well, of course I *want* to...”

Asagi tilted her head with a curious look like the matter concerned someone

else and pressed further...

“Ah, is that so?”

“Yeah, it is! But I don’t want you to hate me for that kind of stuff! I mean, you’re, like, a special friend to me and everything—”

Watching Kojou raise his voice in such desperation, Asagi hummed.

“...Special, huh? I see...”

The teasing leer that came over her lips was her normal, everyday look.

“So that’s why you were keeping your distance from me after our kiss?”

Kojou replied in the bluntest voice he could come up with. “Well, excuse *me*. I mean, I had my own emotional stuff I had to put in order—”

As he did so, he felt an unexpectedly soft touch on his back. Asagi, wearing only a bath towel, was cuddled right up against him.

“A-Asagi?!”

“A freebie. Don’t look this way, though.”

“O-okay?”

This time, Asagi’s completely indecipherable behavior brought Kojou to a complete panic. What did she mean by “freebie”? He wondered if it wasn’t so much a freebie as a one-way ticket to a heart attack, when...

“...Kojou? What’s with these wounds?”

Asagi’s face grew grave when she noticed the wound on Kojou’s chest. It was apparent, even to a complete amateur, that it was no normal scar. There was no way half-baked excuses could fool her now.

Kojou sank into silence and made no reply.

However, the reason for his silence was not his inability to come up with a suitable excuse. Rather, it was because Kojou had noticed that, distracted by his wound, Asagi leaned all the way forward, which allowed the edge of her bath towel to slip down—

“Sorry, Asagi. I’ve hit my limit...!”

Kojou thrust Asagi's body away and rose up forcefully.

"Eh?! W-wait, Kojou?!"

Asagi, who fell into the bath and onto her rear, looked up in shock at the blood-drenched Kojou.

Kojou's nose gushed out blood with a force one would expect from breaking it.

The fresh blood scattered all around the bath, dyeing the surface of the water so that it looked like some kind of crimson marble.

However, by that time Kojou had already leaped out of the bath, rushing into the changing room.

Asagi remained on her butt in the hot water, beside herself.

"Geez...what's with him?!" she muttered.

However, in spite of her sigh, the look on her face was somehow pixie-like. She giggled as she thought back to the look on Kojou's face.

Meanwhile, without a single word, Sana scooped up the bathwater with both hands and looked at it.

"..."

The water, dyed vivid crimson, drenched in the blood of the Fourth Primogenitor—

5

The cabin Vattler had arranged for Kojou and the others only had a single queen bed. It was a family suite through and through.

Kojou had expected it'd somehow turn out like this, so he flopped on the sofa against the wall without thinking any further about it. At any rate, it was the best arrangement for keeping Sana and Asagi safe.

Asagi hadn't made any special complaints, either. She probably figured it was better to be with Kojou rather than on a strange vampire's ship by her

lonesome.

That very same Asagi looked down at Kojou, now lying on his side, as she asked in obvious concern, “Are you all right, Kojou? You looked like you were gonna keel over back there.”

Kojou sluggishly sat up and gave a frail smile with his crinkly lips. “Don’t worry about it...just a little low on blood here.”

Asagi slumped her shoulders in exasperation. “Well, that’s because you blew so much out of your nose back there...”

Asagi was now wearing a *yukata* in place of her filthy street clothes. Apparently, one of Vattler’s maidservants, unaware of the specifics of the Hollow Eve Festival, must’ve figured, *It’s a festival in Japan so you should wear a yukata*, and lent Asagi one from her personal wardrobe.

Asagi, lowering her voice so that Sana—currently jumping on the bed like a trampoline—wouldn’t hear, asked, “So, is Natsuki really the key to the whole prison barrier thing?”

That was a resident of a Demon Sanctuary for you. Asagi apparently had little trouble believing that it really was Natsuki in an age-reduced state.

“Probably. That’d be why the convicts are after her. Apparently, she lost her memory and got miniaturized because of this grimoire from a witch who broke out.”

“Curse?”

Kojou thought back to the discussion between the escapees he’d overheard at the prison barrier. “She said she stole the time she’d experienced...”

Asagi raised her elegant eyebrows.

“The grimoire *Personal History*? That’s a Forbidden-Class Dangerous Object, isn’t it?”

“It’s probably because she used that thing that they were able to break out of the prison barrier to begin with.”

Asagi nodded grimly. “Yes, I see...”

It went without saying that an escape of sorcerous criminals from the prison barrier was a severe problem, not only for Kojou and his acquaintances, but also for every man and woman on Itogami Island.

“So you got wrapped up in this incident because of Yuuma, then?”

The matter-of-fact way Asagi asked the question made Kojou reply in all earnestness, “Eh? How did you know that...?”

“Sheesh,” Asagi sighed.

“Because I looked at records at the Gigafloat Management Corporation. Ten years ago, the witch Aya Tokoyogi was captured by Natsuki in the so-called ‘Black Bible Incident.’ Yuuma’s related to that, isn’t she? Tokoyogi is a very rare name, so it’s no coincidence is it?”

“That...so...”

Kojou bit his lip bitterly as he listened to the revelation.

Now that she’d said it, of course there’d have been a record left of the other battle between Natsuki and Aya Tokoyogi some ten years prior.

If that was so, Asagi surely knew all about the Black Bible and associated elements as well.

However, before Kojou could ask about that, a lisping voice called for Asagi.

“Mama...”

Sana, kneeling on top of the bed, gazed at Asagi, her eyes unable to focus.

Asagi was puzzled as she drew her face close to mini-Natsuki. “Sana? What’s wrong?”

“Sleepy.”

“Ah... It *is* pretty late, isn’t it...?”

Asagi gave a strained smile as she looked at a clock indicating it was nearly midnight. Asagi lay down with Sana, warmly embracing her, and gently stroked her head.

Sana rested her face against Asagi’s chest and closed her eyes in apparent relief. Soon she would be fast asleep, like any normal girl. It was a scene that

somehow warmed the heart.

“Man, you look like a real mother and daughter there,” Kojou whispered, admiring the scene.

Certainly Sana was a very cute girl, but the way Asagi was taking such tender care of her surprised him.

What, you didn't think I could handle it? replied Asagi's posture, her cheeks reddening in a minor fit of pique.

“Let's stop right there. I mean, if she's my daughter, then that makes you the dad—”

“Eh?”

Kojou's response to Asagi's complaint was an incoherent grunt of surprise. Asagi, realizing that she'd slipped, stiffly amended herself. “I—I mean in this situation. That's what it would look like to an impartial observer.”

“R-right. You've got a point there...”

Kojou desperately aided her attempt to stop the slippage into dangerous waters.

Even if she was tiny for the time being, Asagi was sleeping in the same bed as her homeroom teacher. It was best to avoid any question of inappropriate behavior to the greatest possible extent.

Thinking he'd best change the subject, Kojou voiced his honest thoughts on another matter.

“Come to think of it, that *yukata* looks surprisingly good on you.”

His little sister had drilled into him that girls wanted to be complimented on their clothing when they changed into something even a little different from their usual. However, Asagi glared back at Kojou in visible dissatisfaction.

“What do you mean, ‘*surprisingly*’? Of *course* it looks good on me! And why are you in a sports jersey, anyway?”

“Since Vattler didn't send anythin' proper over, Kira lent me something of his. He's a pretty nice guy, you know. See? It's a Boston jersey from when they were

champs.”

Thus did Kojou explain about the sports jersey he’d borrowed. Apparently, Kira was a fan of the Boston Celtics. Asagi looked back with acute annoyance at the proud expression Kojou sported on his face.

“Hey, I don’t know anything about that stuff,” Asagi retorted. “And like, don’t stare at me so much. I’m pretty plain here at the moment.”

“Ah...? Guess you are...”

Only now did Kojou realize that she was giving off a different impression from the norm. As he agreed with her assessment, he abruptly gave Asagi a long, serious stare.

“You look pretty darn good in normal, mature-lookin’ clothes like that, so why do you always dress so flamboyantly?”

“HUH?!”

It sounded like something had snapped inside Asagi as her temples bulged with rage.

Without a word, Asagi took off the sandals she was wearing, holding both in one hand. With an uppercut-like motion, she smacked Kojou’s chin with them, *hard*.

As a dull *thud* reverberated, Kojou groaned in agony and pressed a hand to his jaw.

“That hurt! What’s with you all of a sudden? Do you always smack people with your sandals?!”

“You’re the one who said it way back, dammit! ‘You’re too plain, so you should pay a bit more attention to your appearance and stuff.’ That’s why I—!”

“I—I did...?!”

Kojou endured the pain of the sharp kicks to his back as he arrived at a vague memory.

Now that she mentioned it, he might well have made a throwaway comment like that back in middle school. He’d been of the opinion that she was putting

such a nice face to waste by purposefully trying to blend into the crowd. *Wow, she remembered that from way back*, Kojou thought, admiring a part that was rather beside the point. Then...

At that moment, the supposedly sleeping Sana suddenly snapped her eyes open.

The little girl in the *yukata* slowly stood up. Her movements were unnatural and seemed to defy the laws of gravity.

The bizarre aura surrounding her threw Kojou and Asagi completely off. Sana was clearly not in her normal state. It felt like some unknown entity had taken possession of her body.

Then, as Kojou and Asagi watched her, the little girl took a deep breath.

“—Na—tsu—kyun!”

Making an adorable, decisive pose like some kind of idol singer, she shouted this from atop the bed.

Sana gave off a high-tension vibe that seemed bizarre to the point of incomprehension compared to before, scaring the living daylights out of Kojou and Asagi.

“The hell?!”

“Sana?!”

Sana still had her right hand raised high in a peace sign as her vacant eyes came to a stop.

Like a ventriloquist’s dummy, nothing moved but her lips as she began to speak in a robotic tone.

To put it bluntly, Kojou found the sight terrifying.

“—Main personality shift to sleep mode confirmed. Blocking non-REM sleep. Connecting latent consciousness to backup memory block. Initiating restoration of accumulated personal time. One minute fifty-nine seconds until restoration complete.”

“Wh-what the heck is that?” Kojou wondered aloud.

Asagi, too, spoke in bewilderment as they looked up at Sana, dumbfounded.

“Maybe Natsuki’s memories...came back?”

When Sana heard this, she suddenly spun her head around and grinned buoyantly at the two of them. It was a splendid, picture-perfect smile the real Natsuki wouldn’t have made if her life depended on it.

“Sorry. I am actually Natsu-kyun Minamiya’s backup personality.—*Kyun!*”

Sana stuck her tongue out, another mysteriously adorable pose.

Unsurprisingly, even Kojou was slowly getting used to the bizarre situation. “Er, I don’t think this is really a ‘*kyun*’ moment...?”

“To think Natsuki had a latent personality like this she kept deep down,” Asagi murmured, exhausted. “I’m not sure whether I’m surprised or totally unsurprised...”

Apparently, the current Natsuki was some kind of emergency backup she’d prepared in advance.

She’d probably cast a special spell on her so that, should an enemy rob her of her memories as had happened here, a temporary backup would emerge and work to restore her memories.

Leave it to a first-rate Attack Mage like her to be so prepared. The only miscalculation was the fact her backup personality had a few little...quirks.

Kojou was faintly hopeful as he asked, “So if you restore from the backup... Natsuki’s gonna come back?”

However, the backup twirled around on top of the bed for no apparent reason.

“Sorry! That might not be possible! Memories are one thing, but I don’t think this body can take the strain of using spells! In the first place, there’s not enough magical power!”

“...I see. So this really ain’t gonna work unless we destroy Aya Tokoyogi’s grimoire, huh?”

“Totally. Or you could wait ten years for me to grow up like I was before,

kyun?”

“There’s no way we’re waitin’ that long!”

Kojou sighed, aggrieved, at the backup’s completely unconcerned manner of speech.

It was a moment later that the flat-screen TV nestled into the wall of the cabin came on unbidden without anyone touching the remote control. *What now?* Kojou thought as he looked over dubiously.

A badly made CG teddy bear floated up onto the screen.

“—Finally got a connection. You hearin’ this, Li’l Miss?”

Asagi shrieked at the teddy bear on the TV. “M-Mogwai?!”

Kojou knew the name. This was the avatar of the five supercomputers that administered Itogami Island—Asagi’s AI partner.

“...What are you doing popping up in a place like that?”

“Cause your smartphone ran out of juice. I used the broadcast signal to hack in. Sorry, but there’s more trouble on the way. I’d like you to give me a hand, but...”

“Oh, really. I don’t wanna.”

Asagi turned off the TV without the slightest hesitation. However, the TV turned back on again instantly, to a display of Mogwai on its hands and knees.

“Please, I’m begging you!”

“I said NO. How much do you plan on making a normal high schooler work here? Thanks to you, the first day of the festival’s a complete write-off.”

Asagi tapped the power button on the remote control, rapid-fire, as she spoke. When she saw that wasn’t going to do any good, she moved her hand toward the TV’s power cord. Mogwai desperately shook his head in alarm.

“Wait, wait, wait, this problem totally affects you, too, Li’l Miss!”

“Hah? How so?”

“There’s a weird spatial distortion popping up with Saikai Academy’s campus

at the center of it. Any device using magical power is inoperable inside it, and it seems to cancel all spells in operation, too."

"...You're saying it neutralizes spells?" Asagi asked skeptically.

Mogwai nodded gravely. *"That's the short version."*

"Sounds nice and peaceful."

"If this wasn't an artificial island, I might agree with you—"

"Ah...!" Asagi exclaimed, finally grasping the gravity of the situation.

Itogami Island was a man-made island, a city floating on the Pacific Ocean constructed from Gigafloats linked together.

Of course, normal technology could not make a giant city with over five hundred thousand souls float on water. The Demon Sanctuary of Itogami City was a city reliant on magical spells.

"You don't mean the spells reinforcing the Gigafloats are being canceled, too?!" asked Asagi.

"Yep. Hardening, mass reduction, spatial stabilization, ghost repellers...every kind of spell you can think of is losin' power. Right now it's still only affecting the area around Saikai Academy, but if the area of effect increases at this rate, it's gonna get...a bit rough."

Asagi clutched her head and sighed hard. "...This is the worst."

The cause of the magic nullification was not yet clear, but sooner or later, the city would become unable to support its own weight, and Itogami Island would collapse. It certainly wasn't something she could just ignore.

"So y'see, we're gettin' everyone we can on deck to work on strength calculations and reinforcement plans and evacuation guide programs. We'll pay good money."

"Well, I understand where you're coming from now...but it's pretty tight on this end, too, so I can't just run to the Management Corporation at the drop of a hat. The monorails are still down, right?"

"I get ya. I'll get something whipped up on this end to g—"

The television screen upon which the teddy bear avatar was displayed suddenly blacked out.

“...Mogwai?”

Above Asagi and Kojou’s heads, the sound of a giant explosion reverberated, fiercely rocking the hull of the *Oceanus Grave II*.

Kojou let loose a shout as he tumbled onto the bed from losing his balance.

“What now?!”

At some point, the ship had lost its regular lights, switching to emergency lamps instead.

They already had Sana’s sudden change and the anomaly affecting Itogami Island to worry about. Those two were trouble enough, but now Kojou and Asagi had to switch their attention to the one remaining problem. Kojou remembered what that was as impacts continued slamming against the ship.

The backup looked out of the window as she stated, “It’s an escaped prisoner, *meow*. Looks like he’s coming to board the ship from the front, *mew*.”

Kojou sighed as he shot the backup a frosty look.

“...That’s fine, but you’re massively out of character, y’know. Well, if it’s no worse than this, Vattler’ll take care of it. He got us here just so he could draw ‘em to this ship, after all...”

But the backup had a somber look about her.

Kojou saw the crimson flames in the nighttime sky reflected in the young girl’s pupils. The air was thick with intense demonic power: a powerful surge of energy far surpassing the norm. It might well have been Vattler calling a Beast Vassal.

The next moment, a single, searing beam assaulted the ship, creating a large explosion in its wake. A portion of the ship was engulfed in flames as debris scattered and broke all about. Something had hit the deck of the *Oceanus Grave II* with tremendous force.

In the center of the explosion was a young blond man wearing a white coat. Flames burned around Vattler as he lay on his side, blood covering his whole

body.

Vattler had tried to counterattack against the assaulting escapees, but he'd been the one that got blown away—? *Him*, an Old Guard vampire—?

The backup knocked her knuckles against her own head and stuck out her tongue.

“This doesn't look so good...*kyun*.”

Even as her needlessly overdramatic pose annoyed him, Kojou grabbed her and Asagi's hands and rushed out of the cabin.

6

A little before the prisoners' raid set the *Oceanus Grave II* aflame...

...There were two girls on the great pier of Itogami Harbor.

One was a tall girl wielding a long sword. The other was a girl in a nurse outfit, carrying a silver-colored spear. They were Sayaka and Yukina, following in Kojou's wake.

Sayaka seethed with rage as she looked up at the extravagant cruise ship floating atop the nighttime sea.

“What are you thinking, Kojou Akatsuki?! Staying in the same room as a girl in your own class, with a d-double bed in it...that shameless pervergenitor...!”

The girls couldn't see the interior of the gigantic luxury yacht from the wharf they stood upon. However, Sayaka had sent a *shikigami* made out of thin metal plate to keep an eye on Kojou and the others. For Sayaka, well educated in the arts of curses and assassination, using ritual magic for reconnaissance was part of her specialty.

Technically, Yukina could use the same spell, but Sayaka was far more skilled with it. Of the two of them, only Sayaka the Shamanic War Dancer could penetrate the anti-magic ward deployed all across Vattler's ship to peer within.

“Sana is with them, too, isn't she? So they're not alone,” Yukina countered.

“Now that you mention it, I think so, but those two get along *really* well! Right

now Asagi Aiba is smacking Kojou Akatsuki with a sandal.”

“That’s...getting along well?” Yukina murmured.

Relying on Sayaka as an intermediary, Yukina had a thin grasp of the current situation aboard the ship. As a result, Yukina’s mental image inflated on its own; in her head, something major was going on between Kojou and Asagi.

For her part, Sayaka continued to concentrate her mind on her *shikigami*, tilting her head with a thoroughly mystified look.

“Aiba Asagi’s such a beauty. Why doesn’t Kojou Akatsuki act like he’s aware of it?”

“Um...I don’t really think you are one to talk, Sayaka...,” Yukina reprimanded gently. Her senior from the agency was also somewhat known for her lack of self-awareness.

And then, before she could say any more, she spun the tip of her spear toward the darkness behind her.

“—Incidentally, are you not the one who forced Akatsuki-senpai and Aiba upon each other, Duke Ardeal?”

A voice with a snobbish echo to it floated down from the dark air.

“Oh, you noticed, did you? There’s a Lion King Agency Sword Shaman for you.”

A golden mist riding the wind coalesced into the form of a young man wearing a white coat—Dimitrie Vattler.

Apparently, he’d been watching them while they’d been observing the ship. It was only Yukina’s extremely sharp spiritual senses that allowed her to notice the vampire’s aura while transformed into mist.

“...Do you want Akatsuki-senpai to drink Aiba’s blood?” Yukina demanded. “Why are you going out of your way to offer a sacrifice to the Fourth Primogenitor?”

Vattler smiled casually as he replied.

“Because I thought it was more amusing that way. The fastest way to get

Avrora's Beast Vassals to awaken is for Kojou to drink the blood of a qualified spiritual medium. I think that girl has an excellent chance to make the grade."

"Why do you intend on granting the Fourth Primogenitor that much power?"

As Yukina asked her question, the expression she gave Vattler was one of dead seriousness.

To Vattler, a blood relative of the First Primogenitor, the Lost Warlord, the Fourth Primogenitor, from a cost-benefit perspective, was an enemy. For Vattler to engage in conduct beneficial to Kojou multiple times was very odd indeed.

Even Vattler's lust for combat—how he craved to fight opponents more powerful than himself—was not a sufficient explanation. After all, the other nobles and elders of the Warlord's Empire silently approved of Vattler's conduct; Vattler having been named ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary was proof enough.

Vattler replied to Yukina with a question of his own in an apparent effort to deflect hers.

"Yukina Himeragi...I wonder if you realize the true reason you were chosen to be Kojou's watcher?"

Yukina knitted her brows in annoyance, suspicious of a trick.

"What do you mean by that...?"

Yukina had been told that she'd been chosen to be Kojou's watcher because she was the only Sword Shaman similar in age to him who could stay close without arousing suspicion. She didn't think there was any other reason.

Vattler gazed with apparent delight at Yukina's reaction.

"Allow me to change the question, then. What is the Fourth Primogenitor to begin with? If only three vampire primogenitors, the pillars of the race, ought to exist, why is there a fourth?"

"If Kojou becomes a complete Fourth Primogenitor, we might learn the reason why a fourth came into being. Also, fighting and consuming Kojou in that state sounds *very* amusing."

Vattler laughed as his vulgar thirst for battle finally revealed itself in full. It was a full-throated laugh he normally kept well under wraps.

Yukina subconsciously regripped her spear as she glared at the man. “Duke Ardeal...you are such a...”

Sayaka, having silently listened to their back and forth all this time, poised her sword with a similar level of enmity naked to the eye.

Looking at both of them with a highly satisfied smirk, Vattler abruptly turned his back to them.

“You don’t need to make such scary faces. It’s quite all right—that is for well into the future. Having found my beloved after all this time, I simply must draw out the enjoyment. Besides,” Vattler murmured, “Kojou is not tonight’s guest of honor—”

A malignant aural wave rolled off Vattler’s entire body. He was glaring at a large, unfamiliar silhouette standing at the tip of the pier.

It was a man wearing black armor from the neck down, with a huge sword slung over his back. His unkempt, gray hair resembled the mane of a wild beast. His skin had the color of steel. He didn’t have any obvious demonic characteristics, but he certainly didn’t look like a normal human being.

“An escapee from the prison barrier...!” exclaimed Yukina. She and Sayaka immediately turned their weapons toward the new arrival.

There was a silver manacle covering the gauntlet on the man’s left forearm. He, too, was one of the jailbreakers chasing after Natsuki Minamiya in search of complete freedom from the prison barrier.

He reached toward the giant sword at his back. However, before he could draw it, Vattler unleashed his attack. Without warning, Vattler’s Beast Vassal appeared in the sky and spewed a sickly green beam, striking the man dead center and enveloping him in an enormous explosion.

Yukina stood in shock as she watched the head of the pier collapse.

“D-Duke Ardeal—?!”

The Old Guard vampire’s blow hadn’t held back even a little. She didn’t think

anyone could endure a hit like that. Surely it had been a surprise attack, leaving no opportunity to put up a defensive ward.

However, Vattler shot the smoke-enveloped remains of the head of the pier an expectant look.

“I have no need for an opponent who’d die from just that. There’d be no need for me to trouble myself.”

“—Then I shall repay thy words with interest, Dimitrie Vattler!”

A silver-colored light sliced through the hovering cloud of smoke.

Kicking off the ground and leaping high, the armored man drew the massive great sword from his back and pounded it home into Vattler’s Beast Vassal. The monstrous, deep green serpent was dozens of meters long, yet its entire body shuddered with an anguished roar; beams of light scattered from it as it exploded in every direction. Then, the armored man sliced toward Vattler, defenseless with the loss of his Beast Vassal.

“Gwah?!”

Sustaining a merciless slashing attack from the flank, Vattler’s tall form was blown away. He sailed all the way to the *Oceanus Grave II*, colliding with it, scattering rubble that also buried him and hid him from sight. Fragments of the ruptured Beast Vassal poured down upon the ship, causing explosions and fires in multiple locations.

“Duke Ardeal!” Yukina exclaimed.

“He cut...a Beast Vassal?! No way...?!” said Sayaka, her eyes wide in astonishment.

A vampire’s Beast Vassal was a summoned creature from another world, using vast magical energy to take physical form.

By their very nature, being masses of magical energy themselves, they could only be defeated by slamming even greater magical energy into them.

However, the armored man had felled one with a single blow of his sword. Even though Yukina and Sayaka had just witnessed this with their own eyes, it was still a hard sight for them to easily believe.

The armored man leaped toward the deck of the ship in pursuit of the wounded vampire.

Yukina and Sayaka hastily pursued the man in turn. Kojou and the others were inside the burning ship. They didn't think Kojou, in his present state, could do anything against an opponent who'd defeated the likes of Vattler with one blow. Protecting Asagi, an ordinary person, or the age-reduced Natsuki seemed an utterly impossible task for him alone, but...

A new man suddenly stood before the girls. He had red hair, a small stature, and an inappropriately bright, wide smile on his face.

"Ooh...he really went in big. Tch, I'm late to the party, dammit!"

He spoke in a voice of ready admiration at the sight of the ship ablaze; perhaps his appearance reflected a so-called fiery personality.

Yukina stopped where she stood and raised her spear.

"Who are you...?!"

As she asked it, she remembered the man's face. He was the prisoner called Shtola D.

The corners of his lips rose as he looked back in amusement at Yukina, now in a combat stance.

"What's this...? In this Demon Sanctuary, even nurses work as Attack Mages?"

"Eh?"

"Well, fine. I owe you one for stepping on my pride, little nurse—!"

Yukina didn't have the time to retort, *I am not a nurse!*, but it was apparently a trivial matter to Shtola D. He raised his right hand high above his head, swinging it down at once.

Yukina bit her lip. It was his *invisible slash*, the mysterious attack that even Snowdrift Wolf, able to nullify all types of magical energy, could not completely block. Since she couldn't nail down the timing or distance, deflection seemed the better option—

Yukina raised her spear, relying on intuition alone. She couldn't dodge an

attack when she didn't know the enemy's striking range. She had no choice but to block it.

But just before Schtola D's attack came at her, a silhouette danced right before Yukina's eyes.

“—What are you trying to do to *my* Yukina, you little shrimp?!”

Sayaka's long hair swayed as she lashed out with her long silver sword.

One of the abilities of Sayaka's sword, Lustrous Scale, was to nullify physical attacks.

Through severing space itself, the area sliced by Lustrous Scale became a momentary barrier that was utterly invincible against physical attacks.

And so, Schtola D's *invisible slash* slammed into the *invisible wall* before Sayaka's eyes, bouncing off and petering out.

Schtola D's face twisted in malice.

“...That's a nice trick you've got, bitch!”

He had absolute confidence in his own attack; seeing it blocked had really gotten his blood flowing. It was quite a troublesome personality trait.



“I’ve got this, Yukina. You go help Kojou and the others!”

Having thus spoken, Sayaka glared at the escaped convict with red-hot rage.

Yukina watched Sayaka from behind with a look of concern for a single moment, but quickly nodded to herself and ran off, heading onto the ship enveloped by flames.



CHAPTER FOUR
EROSION OF DARKNESS

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1

Mimori Akatsuki made an amused “mhmm” as she looked around the familiar sight of her guesthouse living room.

There was a half-eaten, formerly frozen pizza on the table; the room’s lights were still on; and someone had forgotten to turn off the TV. She supposed something urgent had arisen, resulting in them rushing out in great haste. Apparently, the son Mimori had raised, Kojou Akatsuki, was living a life quite full of hardships.

She’d expected as much ever since his little sister had gotten wrapped up in a big demon-instigated incident some four years prior, or perhaps it was when, shortly after, he’d met *her*.

The young girl with rainbow-colored hair like billowing flames and eyes like fire.

“My, my...”

Mimori took out the freshly bought ice cream stick from the freezer and munched on it as she left the room.

Nagisa was sleeping peacefully in the bedroom. She was in a deep sleep like she’d been given a sleeping pill or perhaps a dose of a sleeping curse. But there was no need to worry about her; there weren’t many beings on earth that could harm the girl.

She was more concerned about the background of the two girls Kojou had brought with him.

But before worrying about them, she had someone who required her

attention then and there.

Mimori used a corridor usually meant for research personnel only and headed toward the lab.

Magna Ataraxia Research Incorporated, or MAR, was a conglomerate formed of multiple sorcerous product manufacturers with global reach. It was an industrial giant that made everything from pills for the common cold to military fighter jets. Even the laboratory it had built in Itogami City was big enough to have nearly a thousand researchers working there.

However, being the opening day of the Hollow Eve Festival, there was no human presence visible inside the building. Their guards for the facility weren't even human; instead, it employed robots using sorcerous circuitry and *shikigami*. They were excellent workers that never slacked off or let anything slip—unlike humans.

On the other hand, the blunt reality was that a skilled Attack Mage or witch could wipe the floor with them...even a witch who'd lost her Guardian and had sustained nearly fatal injuries.

“My, my...”

Mimori Akatsuki's smile turned strained at the sight of the unlocked, half-open door to the medical office.

There was no sign of the patient within.

On top of the bed were electrodes and IV lines that had been yanked out, alongside scattered bits of ritual scrolls. The floor had fresh blood spatter and stains on it. You'd think a wounded beast had just made its escape.

“Oh, Yuu...”

For once, Mimori looked serious as she sighed. She fished a behind-the-times cell phone out of a wrinkled pocket and began to call the police.

Based on the state of the room, the escaped patient hadn't gotten very far yet. Surely immediate pursuit would bring her back with ease.

“Oh my...?”

But the moment before the call connected, an ominous sound, like a

thunderclap, echoed through the air; the lab's lights went dark. It resembled a small earthquake, but this was a Demon Sanctuary on a man-made island; it didn't *have* earthquakes.

The phone signal went dead, cutting the call. The *shikigami* on patrol stopped in their tracks, too. Apparently, something had just thrown a giant monkey wrench into the magical infrastructure supporting Itogami Island.

"The Black Bible... I see. So that's what it is, Yuu..."

Mimori gently touched the bed, as if she was taking in the warmth the girl had left behind.

A second impact rocked the man-made ground.

2

Upon leaving the cabin, Kojou saw the deck in flames and an armored man carrying a fantastically large sword.

"Vattler's been...beaten...?!"

The young aristocrat who should have been dealing with the man's attack lay buried under a pile of rubble. Kojou was at a loss for words as he watched the unbelievable sight. The thought that the combat-loving vampire could actually lose had never occurred to him for even a millisecond. He didn't have any idea how to respond.

"Who the heck is that?!" Kojou finally exclaimed.

"Bruté Dumblegraff...a mercenary formerly employed by the Western European Church, *kyun!*" said the backup.

In one sense, it was quite incredible that the backup's frivolous tone did not falter, even in this situation.

Yet it was because of that that the armored man noticed Sana and spoke to her in a low voice that almost sounded rusty from disuse.

"I have found you...Witch of the Void!"

Entrusting Sana to Asagi, Kojou prepared to stand off against the armored

man. Yet all the potential adversary did was watch with a slight narrowing of his eyes. Those were eyes that warned, *Get in my way, and I shall cut you down without mercy.*

Kojou tossed out rather casually, “That armor’s a lot like what Old Man Eustach had. You an Armed Apostle, too?”

He wanted any intel he could get on his enemy; it didn’t matter how. The armored augmentation suit that Rudolf Eustach, Lotharingian Armed Apostle, had worn not only enhanced his physical might, but also was equipped with special anti-demon gear he’d called Alcazava. That power potentially put him on equal footing with the likes of Vattler.

However, the man named Dumblegraff shook his head with indifference.

“Armed Apostle...exorcists of the church? Though not unrelated, ’tis different.”

Kojou sighed but wasn’t particularly down about it.

“Figures. Old Man Eustach didn’t have as much fun as you seem to be havin’.”

Even though he was in front of Asagi, Kojou had already hardened his resolve. He’d summon a Beast Vassal. Only by using the powers of a vampire could Kojou protect the girls now.

The problem was that he didn’t know his opponent’s capabilities. Plus, Kojou’s chest wound still hadn’t healed at all. Whether he could control a Beast Vassal in that condition was an open question—

“Uhatsura!”

A surge of demonic energy made the air itself shudder; the giant Beast Vassal was taking physical form.

The creature that emerged from the void was a blue, glittering snake. However, it was not Kojou that had summoned it. It was under the control of the vampire nobleman also known as the Master of Serpents.

“Vattler?!” Kojou shouted in surprise.

The wounded vampire burst out of the rubble that had buried him with a feat of astounding strength and rose to his feet.

“...Sorry, Kojou. Could you please not rob me of the playmate I’ve craved for so long?”

His entire body was drenched in blood; his coat, originally pure white, was a mess. However, his aloof, snobbish manner of speaking was 100 percent intact.

Vattler’s Beast Vassal roared; the deck under the armored man’s feet ruptured.

Cracks in space itself erupted, dragging the enemy in. This was the ability of Vattler’s blue serpent. As befitting the Beast Vassal of an Old Guard vampire, its power was mighty beyond belief.

But the man in plated armor laid his eyes upon the serpent Beast Vassal and swung down his giant sword. It was a robust slice accompanied by a fierce flash of light. That was all it took for Vattler’s Beast Vassal to be rent to pieces, crying in its death throes as it vanished.

Kojou shuddered as he beheld the sight.

“A flesh-and-blood human being...cutting down a Beast Vassal?!”

As a fellow vampire, Kojou understood full well the might of Vattler’s Beast Vassal. The fact that such a beast had been felled was a rude shock.

However, Vattler himself accepted the result rather calmly. His calm suggested he knew from the beginning what the result would be.

“...He is a descendant of the House of Georgius—dragon slayers, in other words. They dwell in the shadow of the Western European Church, exorcists specializing in combat alone, hired by heretics—and great criminals that have destroyed numerous cities as collateral damage in their battles with dragons. They are rare and powerful enemies... Perfect, this is just perfect!” Vattler squealed, as if unable to contain the joy welling up from deep inside his flesh.

The armored man looked upon him and curled his lips in distaste. He, too, had noticed Vattler was off his rocker. “Pathetic, accursed vampire.”

Vattler simply summoned two new Beast Vassals in response.

One was a great, glittering, golden serpent; the other, a massive jet-black one. Yet even though they were Beast Vassals, their nature had much in common

with dragons; furthermore, their attacks were at a decisive disadvantage against a mercenary with the Dragon Killer attribute. The super high-pressure water blades the Beast Vassals unleashed were unable to leave a single mark on the man's flesh; in turn, the man's giant sword butchered the Beast Vassals with one blow to each.

"So this is the immortal body of Georgius...!" Vattler remarked.

"Indeed. My armor exists not to protect my body, but to present the impression that I can withstand battle. It serves no other purpose."

The man didn't have a single scratch on him in spite of taking direct hits from Vattler's attacks.

Bathed in the blood of dragons, his flesh had been made as hard as steel, granting him an immortal body that could not be harmed by any weapon. He had obtained that which only heroes that had slain dragons had earned the right to—

"...Batsunanda!"

Vattler summoned yet another Beast Vassal. This one was a giant serpent with malicious blades in its skin, which turned its entire body into a weapon.

"It is futile, Vattler. Your Vassals are no match for my Ascalon, no matter how large they might be."

The knight lifted his great sword once more. However, Vattler laughed delightedly as he gazed upon him.

"I wonder?"

"Mm...?"

"Surely you, a member of the Georgius clan, are aware of why dragon slayers are extolled as heroes?"

Both of Vattler's eyes, narrowed in amusement, emitted a malevolent crimson glow. With his entire body drenched in blood, his great fangs poked out of his open mouth as he smiled wickedly.

"If the Georgius are truly the strongest, then dispatching dragons is no great feat for them—yet the warriors who challenge dragons to battle are extolled as

heroes. That is because dispatching dragons is difficult for them in spite of that power. In other words, many Georgius have lost their lives in the course of challenging dragons.”

Something like a dreadful shimmer rose from the man’s entire body as he asked:

“Do you wish to put that to the test, Vattler?”

“But of course.”

The nobleman smiled luridly and unleashed his attack. Countless lances, resembling pillars of ice, emerged around the Beast Vassal, surrounding it. The jagged-looking lances shot toward the knight as if they were bullets. The man swung his great sword to cut them down—

But Vattler’s indiscriminate attack also caught the *Oceanus Grave II* in its destructive path. Even some distance away, the countless fragments poured down mercilessly upon Kojou and the others.

“That was close! That bastard Vattler, he’s completely reckless...!”

Asagi was shrieking and clutching Sana as she tried to avoid the hailstorm of debris.

“K-Kojou, what are we gonna do here?!”

The vampire bodily shielded both girls as he desperately cast a look around the deck.

“We’re gonna make a run for it. At this rate, we’re gonna go down with the ship...”

“Run? Run where...?! ”

Kojou was at a loss due to lack of familiarity with the ship’s layout. But he found an aristocrat of small stature wearing a silver tuxedo beckoning to him.

“—Over here, Master Kojou.”

Kojou breathed a sigh of relief as he recognized the gentle, handsome looks.

“Kira, huh?”

“Yes. If you are disembarking, please use the aft deck. This way.”

Kojou and the rest followed after him. “Thanks. But is it all right lettin’ Vattler do whatever the heck he wants here?” Kojou asked.

If Vattler kept up fighting like this, the ship would sink for sure. If that was the case, Kira ought to be abandoning ship just like Kojou and the others.

Of course, Kira and the rest would be more than a little inconvenienced by the ship’s sinking, but...

“Well, ah, he’s always like this, so as his comrades, we follow his lead, you see.”

Kira’s smile was strained as he spoke, shifting his gaze toward the top of the bridge. There stood a young, handsome aristocrat—Jagan. He’d summoned multiple Beast Vassals, apparently to guard against the by-products of Vattler’s duel, which reached all the way into the city at this point.

Looking closer, Kojou saw that a number of other vampires were deployed around the edges of the harbor. He didn’t think Vattler had any consideration for the trouble he caused others, so they’d probably set out on their own.

“However, since the safety of the city is our first priority, we cannot spare anyone to escort you. After all, if Duke Ardeal is serious, he could destroy Itogami City in several minutes.”

“Got it. We’ll watch out for our own necks somehow.”

Kira respectfully lowered his head in a display of gratitude. “You have my thanks.”

Kojou felt exactly the same way. No doubt, given his personality, working close by Vattler’s side meant nonstop anxiety for him.

“You guys have it rough, too.”

Kira gave him a pleasant, bashful smile. “Not at all, I’m pleased to be of some use.”

They arrived at the aft deck, where the gangplank awaited.

“Thanks. See ya later.” Kojou extended his right hand in thanks. Kira’s cheeks turned red as he shook Kojou’s hand. The unexpectedly soft and warm feeling surprised Kojou a little. As he and Kira ended the shake, Kojou stared at his

hand in bewilderment.

Seeing Kojou like that, Asagi glared at him suspiciously.

“Kojou...you *really* don't swing that way?”

“Eh? Whaddaya mean?”

A dubious expression came over Kojou, unable to process just what exactly he was being accused of.

Even now, Vattler continued his duel with the sorcerer aboard the ship. A number of thunder-like explosions resounded, fiercely rocking the massive yacht in the process. The light given off by the raging flames dyed the night sky red.

We should go while the goin's good, thought Kojou as he picked up Sana and rushed down the gangplank. Welcoming them on the pier was a girl in a nurse outfit, wielding a silver spear.

“Are you all right, senpai?”

“Eh? Himeragi—?!” Unexpectedly finding Yukina lying in wait there was not something that set him at ease.

Kojou was extremely grateful to have linked up with Yukina for purposes of protecting Sana.

The problem was the fact that Asagi was there, too. It'd be nigh impossible to come up with a logical explanation as to why Yukina was walking around with a spear without revealing that she was really a Sword Shaman for the Lion King Agency.

But Asagi did not direct her suspicions toward the spear that Yukina carried.

Instead, Asagi looked at Yukina's outfit and skeptically raised her eyebrows.

“...Why are you wearing that?”

Apparently, Asagi felt more threatened by Yukina's silly white outfit than by her spear.

The “nurse” was a bit thrown off by this as well.

“Eh, this is...ah, Mimori had me wear this...”

“Mimori, you mean Kojou’s mom?”

Asagi looked even more on her guard as she snapped Kojou a glare. It was a look that backed Kojou into a corner with the implicit question: *And when did you introduce Yukina to your mother...?*

For some reason, Kojou felt like running for the hills as he averted his eyes. But it was then that he saw something that made him freeze.

Overhead, a crane that had become collateral damage of Vattler’s duel had been destroyed. Pieces of it were currently scattering as they plummeted toward Kojou and the others. It was a huge crane, nearly fifteen meters tall, used for moving around shipping containers.

“Crap! Both of you, get down!”

Kojou flattened Asagi and the others onto the ground underneath him. Even Yukina’s magic-nullifying spear was no match for the collapsing monolith. However, there was no time to escape its fall path, either.

His only choice was to summon a Beast Vassal and blow it away—but could he do it in time?

Kojou bit his lip in despair.

And yet, right before his eyes, the falling crane was hit from the side with a blast so massive it altered its course. The steel structure snapped and splintered into twisted pieces. The blow far exceeded the level of a man-portable weapon; it was in the league of a direct hit from a tank’s cannon.

“Eh?!”

Fragments of pulverized metal rained down around them—

Until a mass of metal rushed over and shielded them at the last moment.

It was a red vehicle Kojou had never seen, with crimson armor covering its entire body.

The closest thing to which Kojou could compare its silhouette was a turtle. It had a huge, round body resting on four fat, stubby legs; apparently, it could rotate 360 degrees without any problems. And where a head ought to have been, there was a large-caliber cannon installed.

This was a Micro Robot Tank, a prototype anti-demonic weapon for urban warfare.

They heard a bizarre voice come from it, one reminiscent of an old samurai movie.

“Ha-ha-ha. That was quite a close call, empress.”

The tank’s carapace opened; a girl who looked around twelve years old emerged. She was a foreign girl, with red hair that looked like it was on fire; she also wore a pilot suit from head to toe, but with a sports jersey over it that had handwritten letters reading DIDIER.

Midway through being flabbergasted, Asagi gasped and regained her senses.

“That speaking style...wait, you’re Tanker?!”

The red-haired girl made a deep, polite bow from within the cockpit.

“Indeed. It is a pleasure to meet you in real life, empress.”

Like Asagi, Tanker was a freelance programmer hired by the Gigafloat Management Corporation. She was considered an Interceptor—a specialist in repelling intruders. No one had seen her in the flesh—or so it was said; Asagi was shocked to find she was a girl even younger than herself.

“I am named Lydianne Didier. Mogwai asked me to come and get you. And my, I must say that is a wonderful outfit for you. That’s the empress for you!”

“W-wait, it’s not really an outfit, it’s just a *yukata*...,” Asagi murmured, looking like she had the stuffing knocked out of her; maybe she was just tired of deep thinking.

Kojou watched her from the side and slowly exhaled. “...Your friends are pretty weird, too, y’know.”

“Sh-she’s not my friend, and I don’t wanna hear *that* coming from *you*!” Asagi retorted in a low voice that sounded like a sulk.

“And what’d you come here for, anyway? If you’re doing part-time for the corporation, can’t you manage on your own?”

The girl named Lydianne had a strangely serious look as she shook her head.

“Unfortunately, that is no longer the case.”

Asagi’s expression turned grave. “You don’t mean the damage from the magic erasure phenomenon’s getting bigger?”

“It is, indeed. Apparently, a similar phenomenon was recorded once before, ten years ago.”

“Ten years ago...?” Kojou asked.

It was ten years ago to the night that one of the escaped sorcerous criminals had been locked away. A similar incident ten years prior...it was too much to be a coincidence.”

“You don’t mean this is all related to that Aya Tokoyogi witch?!” Kojou exclaimed.

Lydianne replied to him with a tone that had an audible hint of admiration. “Are you aware of the so-called ‘Black Bible Incident,’ Mr. Boyfriend?”

Kojou considered amending with, *I’m not her boyfriend*, but time was precious.

“Go on ahead, Asagi.”

Asagi blinked, bewildered, as she noticed the atypically serious look on Kojou’s face.

“Kojou?”

“You take care of the island. We’ll take care of Sana.”

Asagi nodded quietly and handed Sana, who she’d been embracing, over to Kojou.

“Got it. Works for me.”

Kojou was worried the backup would start saying and doing completely inappropriate things again, but even she behaved this time.

If the info from Lydianne and Asagi was on target, Itogami Island was in imminent danger of collapse. People needed Asagi’s strength to see them through the crisis.

A manipulator arm from Lydianne’s small tank reached out and hoisted Asagi

up. The machine was still carrying Asagi like that when she turned toward Kojou and yelled, “But promise me this: When this is all over, you’re gonna go out with me for a bit while the festival’s still running!”

Asagi’s cheeks were red, her meager courage stretched to the breaking point. But Kojou looked up at her and nodded confidently. “Yeah, we’ll go have a ball with everyone.”

Hearing Kojou’s carefree response, Asagi’s face stiffened.

“—Idiot!!”

Asagi yelled indignantly as the tank whisked her away. Kojou stood dumbfounded, unable to comprehend why she was unhappy.

Yukina lowered her eyes and let out a small sigh, as if she completely sympathized with Asagi.

As they stood there like that, the sound of explosions continued to echo behind them without pause.

Combat with the convicts continued. Their battles were not yet over...

3

On the flame-engulfed deck, the two men faced off.

One was an escaped prisoner encased in black armor. The other was a vampire aristocrat wearing a white coat.

They were both covered in blood, but their expressions were polar opposites. The escapee’s was twisted in anguish while the vampire smiled in mad delight as their dance of death continued.

“What’s wrong, Georgius?” Vattler mocked. “The immortal body you’re so proud of is all bloody, isn’t it?”

A two-headed dragon surrounded by incandescent flames floated behind him. All the scales covering its body had the dull glimmer of steel. It was a fused Beast Vassal—a fire serpent and a steel serpent that had been mixed together.

“This is absurd... Why am...?”

The knight kept his sword raised as he let out ragged breaths.

Even though the fusion had spectacularly increased the Beast Vassal's might, it still possessed the dragon attribute. Surely it could not defeat a dragon slayer.

Yet his attacks had failed. The flames enveloping the monster repelled his sword; the steel encasing the Beast Vassal had penetrated the flesh of his immortal Georgius body. The combat power of Vattler's attack snake had exceeded his own power—

Despite Vattler actively controlling his Beast Vassal fusion, he rather casually put to his adversary, "The heroes that slay dragons mostly arrive at tragic ends. Some are shot from behind as a result of conspiracy; others are captured by statesmen and have their heads lopped off. Others still fall to the curses cast by their foes; others still are bathed in poison when their beloved wives betray them—do you understand why?"

The armored man did not reply to the question. He had no spare strength with which to do so.

"It is because heroes, in the course of obtaining power beyond that of human beings, lose something precious—that is, the knowledge of fear, deception, fraud, betrayal, and cunning toward enemies stronger than oneself."

The Old Guard vampire's words rattled the knight.

He remembered the rule of those who had gained immortal bodies—a very simple rule that he had forgotten: Just as the Georgius slew dragons, dragons slew the Georgius. Those who hunted need to be prepared to be hunted themselves.

"You overestimate your own strength, underestimate your enemy's power, and recklessly challenge your foe to a frontal engagement. You wallow in your own power. You are no longer worthy of the Georgius name."

The steel lance unleashed by Vattler's Beast Vassal ran completely through the black armor—and the man's body.

The knight coughed up blood as he fell to his knees. He unleashed a slash with the last of his strength that fended off the dragon's all-encompassing fire.

“I thank you for having entertained me to this extent,” Vattler stated, as he gazed coolly upon his fallen enemy. “Now, then, it is time for you to return to your proper place.”

The knight tried to stand using the great sword to support his weight, but the sword, long having exceeded its limits, shattered like fragile glass.

The man’s manacle glowed; chains shot out. The prison barrier system activated...and dragged him back inside.

His entire body now bound by chains, he whispered, “I see now, Vattler... You seek foes to fight...so that you may fight a more powerful foe who is yet to appear.”

Those were his final words. The Georgius escapee was dragged into thin air and vanished.

Vattler watched until the very end before releasing the fused Beast Vassal from his summons.

The harbor was on fire in various places as a result of their battle. However, the damage was smaller than he had expected. Even the fire on the *Oceanus Grave II* had been largely extinguished.

“Tobias, damage to the ship?”

Vattler called the young vampire to his side to answer his question. Tobias Jagan replied immediately, like the excellent private secretary he was.

“There is damage to the deck and one part of the residences, but she is still completely seaworthy.”

Vattler smiled charmingly. “That is good. It is all thanks to you having been here, Tobias.”

“Not at all,” said Jagan as he shook his head with a small measure of pride.

“More importantly, the other escaped prisoner is still in combat with the Lion King Agency Shamanic War Dancer. What is your command?”

Vattler licked his parched lips. “Ahh, is that so?” he muttered to himself. “It is a pity to grant her prey I have awaited for so long...”

The look he had was filled with raw fighting spirit—a complete contrast with the image he normally projected.

“But I shall exercise restraint... I do not like the whiff in the air.”

A dubious look came over Jagan at his lord’s unexpected decision. “...Lord Vattler?”

The vampire lord seemed to be musing as his gaze shifted to the southern district of Itogami Island.

“Launch the ship. It would seem prudent to gain some distance from the island.”

Jagan spared a stiff glance toward Kojou and the others on the docks below the ship. “Yes, immediately. However, are you fine leaving the Fourth Primogenitor behind like this?”

Vattler brushed back his blood-drenched forelocks as he gave off a casual laugh. “Yes, we can leave the rest to Kojou... I think it will prove a far more amusing spectacle that way.”

4

The invisible blade, whirling around like a giant tornado, split the air as it descended.

It was a long silver sword that blocked it head-on.

Using ritual energy to create a virtual cut in the fabric of space, Sayaka used her sword to shoot down the invisible slice that Schtola D was so proud of, severing the entire physical impact.

Acutely angered by this fact, the young man in dreadlocks ferociously repeated his attack.

“What’s with that sword? It fakes a cut into space?! Well, ain’t that a neat trick, bitch!”

“Who are you calling a bitch, fuzzhead?!”

The ongoing combat was extremely high-level, but the conversation between

them was lowbrow indeed.

Sayaka hated men in the first place; Shtola D, whose violent words and conduct were reminiscent of an elementary grade schoolboy with superpowers, instilled nothing but disgust in her.

“This is why I hate men! They’re stinky, barbaric, crude, ill-mannered—did I mention they stink?!”

“I do *not* stink—!”

Shtola D violently waved his arms. It looked like he was simply flailing randomly, but all of his motion transformed into giant blades that rent the very air.

The area-effect attack had a range of dozens of meters and yet still boasted enough force to pulverize concrete into dust.

Even for Sayaka, this was no easy opponent to defeat. He was much stronger than his bratty looks suggested.

“Don’t tell me...you’re a Hyper-Adapter?” she asked.

Shtola D’s attack was in a completely different category from any attack spell known to Sayaka. It was a special ability that even demons couldn’t see. That said, it didn’t seem that he was using a special weapon like Lustrous Scale...

The only other possibility she could think of was that he was a Hyper-Adapter—a natural psychic who did not depend on magic. But—

Shtola D refuted her idea with extreme prejudice.

“Ahh? Don’t associate me with imitation crap like that, *moron!*”

His reaction threw Sayaka off a bit. *Imitation...?*

“Reverberate!”

As she blocked the invisible slashes, Sayaka scattered metal ritual scrolls about herself. The scrolls momentarily flared with light and changed shape into birds of prey that assaulted Shtola D from four directions.

Sayaka was a specialist in curses and assassination. Properly speaking, she was better suited to surprise attacks than face-to-face combat. However, she

found it reasonable to assume that the sorcerer could not evade a *shikigami* assault right after finishing his own attack. And yet...

“Bitch! You’re just pissin’ me off now—!”

Suddenly, new arms burst out from Shtola D’s back. These weren’t physical parts of his body, but rather, illusionary arms created using psionic energy. However, the illusionary arm also launched invisible slashes, cutting down the assaulting *shikigami* birds in midair.

Seeing that Shtola D now had six arms, Sayaka finally identified his true nature.

“That power, don’t tell me...you’re a Deva?!”

Devas were descendants of Hindu demigods that were purportedly extinct. They were remnants of an ancient race of supermen said to have had a thriving civilization prior to the dawn of recorded history. They had left behind numerous ruins and legends, but even Sayaka had never met one in the flesh until that day.

“Finally got it right, stupid bitch!”

With six arms to work with, Shtola D’s ferocious attacks put Sayaka completely on the defensive.

However, now she knew the true nature of his attacks. The invisible slices were psychic blades created through the use of his natural Deva abilities. To him, able to control such a vast level of psychic energy, Hyper-Adapters really were pale imitations. No doubt the reason Yukina’s spear couldn’t completely nullify his cutting attacks was because they weren’t magical to begin with.

On the other hand, Sayaka felt a vague, formless despair that *this* dim-witted, foul-mouthed man-child was from a so-called ancient race of supermen. It was, frankly, an enormous letdown.

Sayaka’s disappointment was unknown to Shtola D as he opened his mouth wide in a hearty fit of laughter.

“Now that you know, I’ll squish you flat, you dirty Amazon! I *hate* women taller than me!”

“It’s not that I’m tall, it’s that you’re so short!!” Sayaka shouted back, extremely annoyed.

Certainly, Sayaka was a fair bit taller than Shtola D, but it wasn’t that Sayaka was *that* tall—he was, however, quite unusually short.

Apparently, the sorcerer took the matter quite personally: Even his shoulders shook.

“How dare you...! A giant bitch poking at the thing that bugs a guy the most! You wound me...you’ve wounded me, you human mountain range!”

“Just how big do you think I am here?!”

His seemingly casual observation wounded Sayaka every bit as much, but Shtola D paid no heed to that as his attacks increased in force. Lustrous Scale somehow fended them off, but it, too, was close to the brink. The weapon the Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency wielded was never meant to be used exclusively in short-range combat.

However, she’d already used up her ritual scrolls in her last counterattack. She didn’t have an opening big enough to use a large-scale offensive ritual spell. Maybe a Sword Shaman like Yukina could have leaped into his flank and smacked him down the hard way, but Sayaka’s close combat skill wasn’t on quite that level.

“If I could just use my magic bullets...a guy like this’d be history...!”

Sayaka bitterly clenched her teeth as she thought of the darts hidden under her skirt.

Her trump card as an assassin was not a sword; Lustrous Scale’s true form was that of a bow. If she could only have used her whistling arrows, imbued with great ritual power, she had no doubt she could breach Shtola D’s psychic defenses. But she couldn’t use a magic bullet at this range. If she changed Lustrous Scale to bow form, she wouldn’t have any way to rip space to defend herself; at any rate, there was no way Shtola D would just stand idly by, waiting for her to shoot him.

Exasperated, the sorcerer raised all six arms above his head simultaneously.

“I’ll squish ya’ flat! Go, Thunder Ax—!”

He swung all of them down at once. A giant gale erupted, putting previous ones to shame, and assailed Sayaka from above.

“Ugh...!”

Sayaka kept her sword raised even as she grunted in anguish.

She blocked the attacks coming from the front, but it simply wasn’t possible to completely nullify the impacts from all the blasts erupting around her. Lustrous Scale’s spatial severing was the ultimate physical defense, but it came with the weakness of only being able to defend from one direction at a time.

The blast winds toyed with Sayaka’s height, violently smacking her into the ground with a painful bounce. It wasn’t fatal damage, but it stunned her severely. Just sitting up took all of her strength.

Schtola D’s shoulders rose and fell fiercely as he laughed.

“Just look at you now, bitch!”

Apparently, even he was tired out from having launched vicious attacks without pause.

However, he surely had several more similar attacks left to go. Now that Sayaka was immobile, his victory was inevitable. Schtola D, too, had surely noticed that attacks creating blast winds could breach Lustrous Scale’s defense.

Sayaka’s lips shook.

“Blast winds...winds...”

Schtola D raised his arms to resume his attacks once more. The invisible blades made the air shriek as wind howled all around him.

The moment she laid eyes on that, Sayaka’s mouth began to chant without thinking.

“...I, Dancer of the Lion, Archer of the High God, beseech thee.”

She drew a dart from the holster on her thigh. Because she’d used a great many at the prison barrier, this was her very last dart. If she’d been able to deploy it as an arrow, that would have been more than enough.

“Most Brilliant Flaming Horse, Illustrious Kirin, He Who Governs Heavenly Thunder, pierce these evil spirits with thy wrath...!”

Schtola D swung his arms down, releasing the invisible flashes. Sayaka released her dart simultaneously, aiming it at the path the invisible, wind-enveloped blades took.

Sayaka’s magic bullets did not directly attack her foes. Instead, they were catalysts used to activate spells. The sound released by whistling arrows became incantations, producing huge attack spells beyond the chanting ability of human sorcerers.

Lustrous Scale could transform into a bow in order to grant the whistling arrow the wind pressure required for it to whistle. But that very moment, the wind was right there for the taking—

Schtola D gazed, dumbfounded, at the giant magic circle that deployed right before his eyes.

“What the—?!”

He already knew what the spell was. It was a fiendish curse that was, in short, an artillery barrage. It shot out white-hot lightning indiscriminately, with the purpose of destroying an entire area. It was the secret black art this same Shamanic War Dancer had used to set the prison barrier aflame; that was how Schtola D instantly recognized it. He recognized, too, that he, defenseless right after finishing his own attack, was powerless to stop it.

“Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit—!”

Schtola D’s scream vanished within the giant explosion.

The beam fired by the curse as if from a siege weapon seared his flesh; the Deva’s descendant, enveloped by flames, fell into the sea.

5

The aftereffects of the conflagration produced by the magic circle lashed back against their caster, Sayaka, as well. However, she fended them off with Lustrous Scale. Sayaka’s desperate measure meant that she could have easily

shared in the same fate as her adversary.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow...”

Her entire body beat up, Sayaka rose to her feet with little strength left. However, she immediately became dizzy and slowly fell backward. She knew it was dangerous if she didn't break her fall, but even so, she could not will her body to move. She closed her eyes and braced for the impact.

But—

The pain Sayaka had dreaded never arrived.

Someone had grabbed her body midway to the ground.

At the last moment, a very slick Kojou held Sayaka up by her back.

“—You all right, Sayaka?”

His breath was ragged from having run over hastily. He looked concerned as he peered at Sayaka from point-blank range.

“Ah, Kojou Akatsuki...?”

For some reason, Kojou was biting his lip, looking guilty.

“Sorry, Kirasaka, leavin' all that on your shoulders...”

Apparently, he regretted being unable to help her in the fight against Schtola D. Actually, from Sayaka's point of view, having an amateur like Kojou butt in would have only made her job harder, so leaving it to her was very much the right call.

“Th-that's not a big deal, but...why are you here helping me?! Where's Yukina?”

Kojou ignored Sayaka's weak resistance and picked her up. It was a classic “princess carry” pose.

“Hey, just behave for a bit here. You're wounded.”

Thanks to Schtola D's rampage, the ground surface around the harbor was a total mess. It was hard for Kojou to even walk. Left with no other good options, Sayaka wrapped her arms around his shoulders to keep herself from falling.

“B-but...I’m not suited to this kind of thing... I’m too big...”

Sayaka muttered to herself, “Why do I always end up like this?” She’d become very self-conscious of her height due to Schtola D’s stupid insults. Sayaka had a fair bit of a complex about being so tall for a girl when she herself idolized that which was small and cute—like Yukina.

But when Kojou heard her mutter, for some reason, he blushed awkwardly.

“Well, they are pretty big, but I’m not touchin’ them on purpose here... I mean, it’s unavoidable, bein’ like this...”

“Eh? What do you mean, touching...?”

Touching what? Sayaka mused, inclining her head, when suddenly it hit her: Thanks to Kojou carrying her, Sayaka’s breasts were squishing right against his body.

“Aah...! Kojou Akatsuki—!!”

“I told ya’, it ain’t like I’m doin’ it on purpose!!”

“Of all the things,” went Sayaka, sighing deeply. She then recalled that they’d had a very similar conversation once before. Yes, it was like that when she’d first met this man. He’d been a perv with no filter and no tact. But on the other hand, he’d treated Sayaka, a Shamanic War Dancer, like she was just a regular, everyday girl...

Looking up at Kojou from so close, Sayaka said, “...Sweaty.”

Kojou’s skin was slick with a thin layer of sweat from having run over to help Sayaka. As this was pointed out to him, Kojou twisted his lips in apparent minor dismay.

“Well, of course I’m gonna get sweaty from all the stuff goin’ on. If you don’t like the smell, just move away a bit.”

“...I don’t mind it.”

It was an honest reply, and she moved her face closer to Kojou’s neck. Yes—she hated barbaric, tactless, smelly men, but *his* scent she didn’t mind at all.

“Kirasaka?”

Kojou looked a tad bewildered at Sayaka's indecipherable behavior. Then, from behind his back—which Sayaka couldn't see—they heard a small “ahem,” as someone cleared her throat.

Sayaka slowly shifted her gaze onto a teenage girl standing there in a nurse outfit.

She was watching Kojou and Sayaka, pressed against him in a very intimate position, with a conflicted look on her face.

Sayaka's face went completely pale as she asked in a rather shrill voice, “Y-Yukina? Since when have you...?”

Yukina seemed a bit at a loss as she lowered her eyes.

“Since about when you almost fell to the ground... I'm sorry, this is my fault.”

Her face beet red, Sayaka hastily replied, “I-it's all right! I'm just a bit tired; I'm not badly hurt at all! And with his attacks, you'd never have been able to get close to him in the first place—!”

Sayaka didn't understand why she felt so *guilty* right then. *That was just a momentary slip*, she told herself. It wasn't as if she'd let Kojou Akatsuki into her heart; that space was reserved for Yukina alone.

“A-anyway, can you let me down already?! I can walk on my own now!”



“Ah, can you?”

Kojou gently put Sayaka down on the ground. Though Sayaka secretly regretted this, she nonetheless moved away from him, as if fleeing.

That was when Sayaka noticed the existence of a girl Yukina had along with her. It was a little girl whose face seemed vaguely familiar; her long black pigtails left a strong impression.

“So the Witch of the Void really has...shrunk down. Seeing her in person...how should I put this...?”

Yukina picked up where Sayaka left off. “Cuter than you expected, I imagine?”

She was a woman who had the air of a doll to begin with; now that she was even smaller in size, she looked like a doll through and through.

Kojou voiced his agreement.

“Well, in outward appearance, at least.”

At any rate, seeing her in the flesh like this, there was no doubting that the little girl was truly Natsuki Minamiya. Her appearance and the aura she gave off just had way too much in common.

“Well, we managed to get ahold of her. What’ll we do now?” Sayaka asked as she checked the state of her own wounds.

The incident had certainly not been resolved. Natsuki was still mini; Yuuma Tokoyogi was still gravely injured. Plus, they had several escapees left uncaptured, including the ringleader herself, Aya Tokoyogi.

Kojou looked down at the young Natsuki as he replied. “We’ll take her to MAR. Thanks to Vattler and you, Kirasaka, it looks like we’ve taken care of most of the jailbreakers after Natsuki. If we can just get her memory back, we might be able to save Yuuma.”

Sayaka had no particular problems with that. From a security point of view, heading to MAR was an entirely rational decision.

However, they heard an objection to Kojou’s decision from an entirely unexpected direction.

When Kojou and the others heard that voice, full of malignant hostility, they turned around with great vigor.

“To save that disposable...doll? Such concern is...unnecessary.”

Standing amid the darkness of the night was a fire-eyed witch wearing a white-and-black ceremonial robe.

“—Aya Tokoyogi!” Yukina exclaimed.

“You’re here for Natsuki, too?!” Kojou added, both of them shielding Sana with their bodies.

Sayaka clicked her tongue, mortified. Now that she was out of ritual scrolls and arrows, she had no effective means to attack a remaining witch.

However, Aya Tokoyogi gazed listlessly at their reactions to her.

“Do not be angered so, Fourth Primogenitor. I have not come to kill the Witch of the Void.”

Her smoldering eyes narrowed as she smiled.

“Indeed, you have my thanks. Thanks to that woman drawing the escapees away, I have finished preparing for tonight’s festival. And even if she did betray me once, she is still my friend, one might say?”

A crude voice thick with hostility interrupted Aya Tokoyogi’s words.

“—Hold it right there, bitch.”

The young man, with dreadlocks thoroughly drenched with seawater, was just climbing on top of the cliff as he glared at Aya. It was Schtola D.

Normally, he’d have been gravely wounded to the point of being unable to move, but his beaten and battered body rose to its feet with the support of psychic energy.

Schtola D turned his hate-filled gaze not to Sayaka, but toward Aya Tokoyogi. He’d finally realized that they’d been deceived by Aya.

“What do you mean...drawing the escapees away? You tricked us, didn’t you?!”

Aya smiled as she looked upon the scowling, angry face of the man-child with

open scorn.

“You are quite the fool to take a witch’s words at face value.”

She’d sent the jailbreakers in pursuit of Natsuki and into combat against Kojou and the others. As a result, Aya had been able to move freely without anyone interfering. Neither Vattler nor the Island Guard had gone after her whatsoever.

She’d used the prisoners. It was they, and not Natsuki, that had been the real decoys.

Howling with rage, Schtola D raised his right arm high.

“No one messes with me, bitch—!”

But the invisible blade that should have emerged from gusting wind never arrived.

Simultaneously, his wounded body seemed to lose all support as it flopped onto the ground.

His arm tried to pull him up once more, but ended up merely clawing at the ground.

“The hell...my power’s...sh-shit...,” Schtola D murmured weakly.

However, he was not the only one stricken by the anomaly. Sayaka let out a bewildered cry as the tip of the sword she was gripping fell to the ground.

“Lustrous Scale is...?! ”

The long sword, manufactured using state-of-the-art sorcerous technology, suddenly lost its shine and instantly became heavier. She was sending ritual energy into it, but there was no response whatsoever. Its holy weapon properties had completely ceased.

Kojou noticed how shaken Sayaka was and met Yukina’s eyes.

“...The magic vanished? No way?! ”

Kojou and Yukina were aware of the magic annihilation phenomenon assaulting Itogami Island.

They realized that its effects had now reached as far as Island East.

However, Aya Tokoyogi attacking at the exact time the anomaly was occurring was unlikely to be any sort of coincidence. It was better to assume that Aya herself was the very cause of said anomaly.

For her part, Aya materialized her own Guardian.

“—L’Ombre.”

It was a faceless knight clad in jet-black armor.

The knight she had pegged L’Ombre—the Shadow—mercilessly thrust his sword into the exhausted, unmoving Schtola D, then a second time, then a third—and then it stomped on the blood-drenched man.

Schtola D’s lips trembled, barely able to make out a throwaway line.

“You really got me, bitch... Dammit, I’ll remember this.”

As he lost consciousness, the tip of the black knight’s sword shifted toward his back.

“Stop this!” Kojou bellowed. “Aya Tokoyogi, you’ve gone too far yet again!”

Seeing Schtola D being trampled made Kojou picture Yuuma, wounded and fallen, all over again.

But suddenly seeing Kojou’s entire body enveloped by lightning, it was Yukina who gasped. “Senpai?!”

Kojou’s crimson-dyed eyes glared at the fire-eyed witch. A gold-glimmering beast appeared as Kojou thrust his right hand before him.

“C’mon over, Regulus Aurum—!”

A mass of magical energy so dense that it rivaled the heat of a raging storm cloud emerged and adopted the form of a giant beast.

This was a summoned beast from another world: one of the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor. The destructive mass, akin to a natural disaster taking physical form, charged at the speed of light toward the witch as she stood still. Watching this, Aya Tokoyogi’s expression never changed in the slightest.

Aya Tokoyogi murmured in visible admiration as she traced symbols into thin air.

“So you had that much power remaining... You live up to your reputation, I see.”

The lightning lion slashed at the glowing, radiant symbols. And then—

“But that reputation ends now.”

“—Wha—?!”

Without warning, the Beast Vassal that Kojou had summoned melted into thin air, vanishing without a trace.

They had neither heard nor felt an impact. Not even a mild disturbance of the wind remained.

The lightning lion had been erased, as if it had never existed in the first place.

No—it was not the Beast Vassal alone that had dissipated. Kojou’s own body had lost the surge of demonic power contained within.

Having lost the power of the World’s Mightiest Vampire, all that remained was a high schooler’s flesh and blood.

Sensing that enormous magical power had vanished, Yukina was beside herself as she shook her head. “No...senpai’s power is...”

Aya Tokoyogi laughed with refined grace.

“This is the Black Bible, Fourth Primogenitor. Itogami Island has already become *my* world. All supernatural power has been lost, save mine; even the power of a primogenitor.”

Before Aya’s words were even finished, Kojou’s body shuddered with the sound of a faint, smooth impact.

The faceless knight’s giant sword had been thrust through his chest.

“Gahah,” coughed Kojou, blood painting his lips. The pain was too fierce for him to make more of a sound than that. Now that Kojou had lost his power of immortality, the wound was most certainly mortal.

As Kojou collapsed onto his knees, Sayaka clutched him and shouted his name.

“Kojou Akatsuki—!”

It was an image of defenselessness one normally couldn't even imagine from her. Beholding Sayaka like that from behind, the black knight raised its sword high. The scream that followed shook the night sky over the harbor.

It came from Yukina.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa—!"

With spell-reinforced might, her slender body sprinted. Her silver spear emitted a dazzling glow as it deflected the black knight's sword.

Bewilderment rose in Sayaka's eyes. Yukina was fighting a witch's Guardian on even terms.

"Yukina?!"

In the witch's world, which nullified even the power of a primogenitor, Yukina alone had retained her ritual power.

Aya Tokoyogi smiled oddly. "As I suspected. So you refuse to be governed by my world, Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency?"

Teleportating, Aya moved herself and her Guardian away; having lost sight of her foe, Yukina's spear sliced thin air.

Aya and her Guardian reappeared behind Yukina. There was only one person there, standing still: Sana.

"You are indeed a suitable guest for my experiment. I was right to come and extend a personal invitation."

"Sana?!" Yukina cried.

Yukina couldn't attack Aya now, with the very young Natsuki taken hostage.

Seizing the momentary opening, Aya summoned a cage. It was shaped like a birdcage but built stout enough to hold a ferocious beast. The cage, between four or five meters in diameter, materialized around the Sword Shaman and shut her within.

The steel bars were nearly ten centimeters in diameter and were not magical constructs. Even Yukina's magic-nullifying spear could not break them. Imprisoned inside the birdcage, Yukina bit her lip, unable to do anything other

than glare at Aya. A moment later, the birdcage vanished, along with Yukina.

They'd been carried away using teleportation. What's more, no sign remained of Aya, her knight, or Sana.

Kojou, covered in blood, moaned in agony.

"You don't mean...it was Yukina she was after...not Natsuki...? Why...?"

He finally understood that Aya Tokoyogi had appeared to whisk Yukina away, not Natsuki. As he thought about it more, Aya had spoken to Yukina during their encounter at the prison barrier like Aya knew something about her.

But even if Kojou knew what, he could no longer do anything about it.

Desperately clutching her fallen friend, Sayaka was in tears as she shouted. "Kojou Akatsuki?! Hang in there, you're an immortal vampire, aren't you?! Hey!!"

Looking up at her tearful face, all Kojou could murmur before blacking out was, "Sorry."

CHAPTER FIVE
FIESTA FOR THE
OBSERVERS

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1

The island creaked. It was the sound of steel rubbing against steel, reverberating like distant, rolling thunder without pause; irregular tremors shook the ground as if buffeted by the waves of the sea.

Itogami Island was an artificial island that floated on the Pacific Ocean. Its population was 560,000 strong. It was densely packed, with countless building complexes and high-rises, as well as underground shopping districts all over the island, all supported by metal Gigafloats.

The closest example was a sand castle on top of a floating car wheel. There was nothing remotely sane about the city's construction whatsoever.

The plainly unstable island was supported through the use of magic. Buildings had their effective mass reduced through use of spells, and ground plates with multiple layers of magical strengthening, in turn, supported these. The steel, the cement, and even the plastics used for construction were all magical materials. It was no overstatement that not a single building on Itogami Island was unaffected by magic.

What would happen, then, if all that magic just disappeared—?

Sections reaching the limits of their strength would gradually break down, and the Demon Sanctuary of the Far East would gently begin to collapse.

The violent, endless creaking reverberated in Kojou's ears. His cheeks were hot. Those were the sensations that roused Kojou's foggy mind as he realized someone was repeatedly slapping his cheek.

"Oww..."

Moving to get up in apparent protest, Kojou sucked in his breath as his abdomen conveyed an incredibly fierce pain.

This wasn't an *ow, ow, ow* kind of pain. It felt like a giant blade had slashed him from his right breast down to his lower abdomen. In fact—it took a minute, but Kojou finally remembered that that was pretty much how it had happened.

The sword of Aya Tokoyogi's Guardian had impaled him through and through.

Sayaka noticed Kojou's conscious agony. "Kojou Akatsuki! You're awake?!"

It was Sayaka who was straddling Kojou and continuously slapping his cheek as he lay on his back. But he couldn't complain about that—not when he saw the large drops falling from her teary eyes.

When Kojou spoke, his voice was so hoarse that he barely recognized it as his own. "Kira...saka... Where are we...?"

He sounded like an old man on the brink of death. He found it hard to even breathe—having one of your lungs punctured tended to do that.

"A clinic room at the ferry terminal. I brought you here hoping I'd find someone here, but..."

Kojou gave her a frail, strained smile. "...Well, most normal folks would run at the sight of a vampire's Beast Vassal runnin' wild."

The great wharf where Vattler's ship was moored was practically on the tip of their noses. No doubt everyone working here had headed for the hills out of fear of becoming collateral damage.

Sayaka let out a sob.

"Damage from the fighting cut off the highway, so we can't get out of the harbor district. Can't even call an ambulance in... If I could at least use ritual spells..."

She had a shaken look you wouldn't expect from a professional Attack Mage. She was Yukina's senior and constantly showed how talented she was, but mentally speaking, she was surprisingly brittle.

Kojou wondered if it was because her personality was gentle by nature.

“Sorry to cause you...so much trouble...”

Sayaka wiped her tears from her eyes as she yelled, “You really do!”

“...Himeragi and Sana?”

Sayaka replied to Kojou’s question with a silent shake of her head. Aya Tokoyogi still had them.

That so, Kojou thought with a sigh. He’d have liked to go rescue her that very moment, but—

“Is it really the time to worry about others? You almost died, you know!”

“Yeah, sure feels that way.”

Kojou offered limply, “Ha-ha-ha.” He didn’t need Sayaka to tell him *that*. It’d already been some time since the sword had impaled him. His immortal, immutable primogenitor body ought to have completely healed a wound no worse than that by now.

Thanks to the Black Bible that Aya Tokoyogi had activated, all unnatural powers had vanished from the Demon Sanctuary. As a result, Kojou’s powers of a vampire had been stolen. An average human being would normally be dead after sustaining a wound like this. In one sense, it was an entirely natural result.

Sayaka shouted in Kojou’s direction, “—Blood!”

“Eh?”

Sayaka spoke as she undid the ribbon and topmost button of her uniform.

“Here, drink my blood! Yukina and the princess did this to save you when you were on the verge of death before, right?!”

Moonlight shone down upon her slender neck, giving it a pale gleam.

“Er, but,” Kojou protested with a shake of his head.

“This ain’t exactly the same situation... In the first place, if I’m almost dead ‘cause I lost my vampire powers, what’s drinking your blood gonna do here?”

“Shut up!” Sayaka shouted, panicked, as she stood up.

Looking straight down at Kojou as she stood right over him, Sayaka bit down

on her lip hard in visible defiance and grabbed the edges of her skirt on both sides. She then raised them up.

Sayaka's cheeks were flushed red with embarrassment and her eyes teary as she demanded, "N-no complaints about this, right?"

Kojou coughed up blood as he audibly cleared his throat. "What the heck do you think you're doin'?!"

It was lust, not hunger, that triggered a vampire's craving for blood; so, if you wanted a vampire to suck your blood, sexual seduction was entirely logical.

But why had she settled on exposing her panties as her means to seduce a high school boy? Even girls in grade school could think of higher-class techniques than that. In one sense, though, it suited Sayaka's naïveté very well.

In the first place, it was true that making a girl with such high-end good looks like Sayaka's resort to this had an attractiveness all its own. He gave her high points for averting her eyes in embarrassment. On top of that, Sayaka's exposed panties were unexpectedly thin on the sides. They were *side-tie panties* held together by a thin ribbon...

"K-Kojou Akatsuki...?"

"Er, well, if I didn't have a big hole in my gut, I think I'd be givin' this a big thumbs-up, but... So, ah, Kirasaka, you're a side-tie kinda girl?"

"Wh-what difference does it make to you?! I have a holster there so it has to be that way!"

Certainly, Sayaka's pale thigh had a band-type holster holding her cursed arrows on it. They'd get in the way of normal underwear, and apparently made stripping them off more trouble than it was worth. It was an odd source of trouble for a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency.

"So what about the vampiric urges?!"

Kojou felt apologetic as he shook his head.

"Sorry, and after all the help you've been, too."

Telling a guy on death's door to get turned on by the sight of panties was a bit of a hard sell. That said, Sayaka wasn't willing to give up just from that.

“S...so panties alone won’t cut it?!”

As she spoke, she reached to the side ribbon holding them together. Backed into a corner, she’d completely lost sight of all propriety.

“Hey, wait! Calm down!”

Kojou was going to add, *What do you think you’re doin’?* and stop her then and there, but he’d lost so much blood that he couldn’t move properly.

Then, a moment after Sayaka undid the ribbon on one side...

“—Hya?!”

Click. They heard the sound of the clinic door opening and sensed someone coming in. Sayaka, standing over Kojou with her skirt raised as he lay on the verge of death, suddenly yelped as she regained her composure.

A slender silhouette entered the room, wearing a white gown.

She had a symmetrical face and a lean, efficient physique. Her hair had curled tips in a short bob style. She had bandages all over her body; thanks to blood loss, her face looked rather pale. Still, her energetic aura remained intact even so.

“Yuuma?!” Kojou yelped.

Kojou couldn’t come close to understanding why Yuuma Tokoyogi, who, last Kojou checked, was being treated at MAR for grave injuries, had appeared here of all places.

Forgetting to put her disheveled clothing in order, Sayaka reached toward her long silver sword.

“Y-you...! How did you get here...?”

Her expression showed that she hadn’t yet decided if Yuuma was currently friend or foe. For her part, Yuuma glanced back at Sayaka with the look of someone sporting a guilty conscience.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t intend to intrude but...oops...”

“Wh-wha—?!”

Sayaka’s cheeks went beet red as her grip on the sword slackened.

Yuuma made labored breaths as she put a hand on the wall beside her. There was a thin coat of sweat on her brow.

“Even beat up like this, I can still use a spell to find where Kojou is. I couldn’t just teleport over in the blink of an eye, though...”

Kojou looked over her pale face with alarm. “Yuuma, your body’s all...”

The white gown covering Yuuma was drenched in fresh blood. She’d opened her previously bandaged wounds from pushing herself so hard.

However, Yuuma shook her head with her usual teasing smile.

“You look closer to buying the farm than I do, Kojou.”

Kojou gave a strained smile without thinking.

“I suppose, now that you mention it...”

Even with both of them in critical condition, Kojou, who could barely move at all, was clearly worse off.

Sayaka glared at Yuuma. “Your mom’s the one who did this. She kidnapped Yukina, the one who tried to save you, too.”

Yuuma’s face was the spitting image of Aya Tokoyogi’s; in the first place, Sayaka hadn’t spoken to Yuuma before, being a witch from the LCO. Sayaka had a frosty look on her as she watched their new companion.

Yuuma stated calmly, gravely, “I know. That’s why we need to begin immediately, Miss Kirasaka.”

Yuuma’s abrupt declaration threw Sayaka off.

“Begin...begin what?”

“Picking up where you and Kojou left off, but this time, with the three of us.”

“Eh?! Th-the three of us...?!”

Sayaka’s face burned bright red, possibly from some kind of highly impure image.

Yuuma looked natural as she drew near to Sayaka’s ear.

“It’s all right. We will *not* let Kojou die here.”

“R-right.”

“So, that being the case...”

With a soft whisper that echoed in Sayaka’s ear, Yuuma gently put her hands around Sayaka’s hips. Before Sayaka noticed, Yuuma had undone her hook with a practiced hand. Right before the fallen Kojou’s eyes, Sayaka’s unfastened skirt obeyed the law of gravity and fell. All that remained was her half-removed side-tie panties.

“Gyaaaaaaaaa—!”

Sayaka’s scream, like silk being ripped apart, echoed in the moonlight.

2

Yukina walked alone in a building illuminated by the setting sun. It was the very familiar Saikai Academy campus building, and there, Yukina was wearing her middle school uniform. It was after classes, with no sign of other students inside the school.

Normally, the grounds would be full of music: voices from athletic clubs and the harmonies from the music clubs. The exception was at a single place—where two silhouettes stood against the shade-covered floor of a classroom.

Two people glared at each other in the empty classroom: a small, doll-like schoolgirl in her uniform and a young woman wearing a monochrome ceremonial robe.

The woman in the robe offered to the schoolgirl, “Come with me, my friend.”

Her eyes were not yet dyed in crimson like that of flame. Thanks to that, she felt far more friendly and sociable, much like Yuuma Tokoyogi.

“You and I are the...same. We are both pureblood witches whose souls were stolen by devils at birth. I shall alter the destinies they cursed. They shall be destroyed along with their despicable world.”

The small girl in the uniform asked in reply, “So that’s what the Black Bible is for?”

A light floated into the girl's large eyes that rejected the offer from the woman in the ceremonial robe—Aya Tokoyogi.

Aya's voice grew ragged in apparent sorrow.

"Why do you hesitate? Do you sympathize with the people of this island? Do not forget, the corporation lets you roam free only because you are the tool they designed to administer the prison barrier... Someday, you shall sleep forever and be put in another world all...alone. You will not grow old, no one will ever touch you, while you only dream of this world..."

The girl offered a faint, charming smile to the woman, pitying.

"...You're very kind to worry about me like that, Aya Tokoyogi."

It was a gentle, considerate smile for an old friend, and also a farewell.

Aya Tokoyogi produced a book from the sleeve of her ceremonial robe.

"Hand over the Black Bible, Natsuki. I cannot forgive this insane world, and this is for your sake, too!"

This was forbidden sorcery that was the exclusive province of the leader of the criminal organization, LCO—the grimoire that controlled one's personal history, stealing the time and memories of another.

"So you will steal my memories, Aya?" Natsuki asked with a tone of resignation.

The grimoire known as the Black Bible was already lost. Natsuki Minamiya had burned it to ashes days before. As a result, the experiment Aya Tokoyogi had conducted, the so-called Black Bible Incident, had ended in failure.

However, the knowledge of the Black Bible still lived on in the memories locked away in Natsuki Minamiya's mind. With that knowledge, the Black Bible could be recreated. Even if Natsuki refused to cooperate, all Aya had to do was rob the girl of her memories.

And so Aya clutched the grimoire for that purpose as she laid down her ultimatum.

"The classmates you are attempting to protect shall someday become adults and leave you behind. Then, they shall forget you—you, who has nowhere else

to go.”

“Hmph...that’s fine, too, really.”

Natsuki’s smile seemed desolate somehow. Natsuki Minamiya, the Witch of the Void, and Aya Tokoyogi were enemies because Natsuki was protecting her fellow Saikai Academy classmates. It wasn’t because the Gigafloat Management Corporation employed her as an Attack Mage; it wasn’t because she was a witch—she opposed the leader of a vast criminal organization on the principle of that fickle thing known as *friendship*.

Natsuki stated, neither out of pride or irony, “Maybe I’ll be a teacher here someday and watch new students grow up...”

Aya Tokoyogi glared with a look of rage at the somehow sunny expression Natsuki wore.

To Aya, Natsuki Minamiya’s completely shameless behavior toward those who used and scorned witches was an intolerable charade.

“You fool.”

Aya Tokoyogi’s eyes dyed the color of flames. With a sway, the silhouette of a jet-black knight rose from her back.

Behind the school-uniformed Natsuki, a giant shadow of her own emerged, glittering gold.

Combat between witches was not a head-on confrontation, smashing one’s magical power against another’s. Instead, they were duels of trickery, creating an opening in the other’s defenses; the first one to land an attack on her opponent, even for a single instant, would be the winner, for the body of a witch was far too weak to block the vast magical energy that witches possessed. Victory and defeat were both settled by whoever could get a spell in first.

Yukina didn’t need to watch to know how the fight had ended.

Natsuki Minamiya, not even sweet sixteen at the time, had triumphed; Aya Tokoyogi had been imprisoned in the prison barrier for the last ten years. This memory was from the fight ten years prior.

Yukina interrupted their battle, asking as she stepped into the classroom,

“This is Sana’s—Ms. Minamiya’s dream, is it not?”

The two witches, glaring at each other, vanished as if mere illusions. All that remained was the classroom in the light of the setting sun. Just before the images of the witches vanished completely, Yukina wondered if it was her mind playing tricks or if she truly heard the voice of Aya Tokoyogi scornfully stating, “No. Perhaps this is *your* dream, Sword Shaman.”

Standing all alone in the center of the otherwise empty classroom, Yukina sighed deeply.

It was such a faithful recreation that Yukina found it hard to believe, but apparently, this school building was on the inside of the barrier Aya Tokoyogi had erected. It was a dense space that might be better described as another world altogether. Apparently, the line between dream and reality was very thin within it.

Even if she wanted to get out, Yukina did not have Snowdrift Wolf in her hands. Surely that spear, able to rend any barrier, could break through this world of illusion, but...

As Yukina stood still, she heard a warm, familiar voice.

“Himeragi!”

When she turned, a schoolboy wearing a parka over his uniform was just rushing into the classroom in great haste.

A moment later, a tall girl entered after him and bear-hugged her.

“You okay, Yukina?!”

Yukina hesitated; she felt so alive that you wouldn’t think she was an illusion. Perhaps they, too, were captives in the world Aya Tokoyogi had created?

“Senpai? Sayaka? Are your wounds all right?”

“Yeah,” said Kojou, “they’re all right now. Wanna see for yourself?”

Kojou moved his hands as if readying to suddenly yank the top of his uniform off. Seeing this, Sayaka smacked Kojou in the back of his head, hard. As the dull *thud* reverberated, Kojou clutched his head.

“Yeowch! I was just kidding, geez...!”

Sayaka, rather worked up, strongly embraced Yukina.

“It doesn’t sound like a joke coming from you, pervert! Stay back, I don’t want you corrupting my Yukina!”

Yukina became more and more confused as she vividly felt the warmth of Sayaka’s skin and the squish of her breasts. You wouldn’t think *that* sensation was an illusion...

Those precious to her were right by her side. Enveloped by a feeling of safety and reassurance, the existence of Aya Tokoyogi and the Black Bible incident felt irrelevant to her.

“Let’s leave this idiot here and go to club, Yukina.”

Yukina shook her head in confusion as Sayaka pulled her by her arm.

“Club...you say? No, I’m senpai’s watcher...”

Kojou tilted his head with a mystified look.

“Whaddaya mean, watcher? You mean you’re comin’ to watch us practice?”

“Eh?”

Yukina’s eyebrows rose as she noticed the sports bag Kojou was carrying. The towels and basketball shoes sticking out of the bag felt wrong to her. But it didn’t feel *bad*. What felt wrong was how much she wanted to accept it at face value.

“Senpai...did you start playing basketball again?”

“Whaddaya mean, start...? Our club’s pretty weak sauce, but it’s still alive an’ kickin’.”

“But your magical power?”

“Manicle...what?”

What’s that all about? said Kojou’s grimace. Sayaka made a charming and very amused smile as she seized the opportunity.

“Manicle powers, huh? So that’s how you roll, huh? What a perv.”

“I am not!! Well, our manager is kind of a sadist... Ugh, that Asagi, what’s with that training schedule...?! Is she *trying* to kill us?!”

“Let’s get to the archery range ASAP. Masochism’s contagious. Any more kinky talk like this and it might spread.”

“Like hell it will!!”

Sayaka, wearing a Saikai Academy uniform, was getting along very well with Kojou. Based on the content of the conversation, Sayaka was apparently Yukina’s senior in the archery club.

I see, thought Yukina, sighing. She thought it’d be nice if she could live in a world like that.

How wonderful it might be if she could.

Kojou looked at Yukina with concern as emotion vanished from her own face.

“Himeragi?”

However, Yukina’s eyes no longer paid him any heed.

“So that is how it is? My dream is to have met senpai as a normal junior high student, with a very kind Sayaka along with me...? A possibility that might exist in another world...”

However, the smile Yukina made as she strongly clenched her right fist was a sad one.

Her fingers conveyed the feel of the metallic spear that shouldn’t have been in her hand, the Schneewaltzer, secret weapon of the Lion King Agency, able to rend any witch’s barrier and nullify all magical energy—no magic could fool it.

“—Snowdrift Wolf!”

Yukina called out the name of her spear. Its tip began to glow, as if responding to her voice.

The purifying light ripped the illusion apart. A dimly lit classroom surrounded by the darkness of late night appeared in its place.

The illusions of Kojou and Sayaka vanished. Yukina was not wearing a school uniform, but rather, the nurse outfit she’d borrowed. It was still dark outside

the windows. Apparently, it hadn't been more than two or three hours since she and Sana had been abducted.

Yukina and Sana were both held in cells the shape of birdcages.

Sana was apparently asleep. The annihilation of magic on Itogami Island had apparently wiped out the backup personality as well.

Even Yukina's spear could not slice apart the steel cage. It seemed very difficult for her to escape under her own power.

It was then that she heard a voice behind her—the voice of Aya Tokoyogi.

“If you desire it, you can change that dream into reality.”

The sound of compassion in her voice gave the declaration the ring of truth.

Yes. *She* could do it. Just as she'd erased all supernatural power from Itogami Island, she could alter Kojou's and Yukina's destinies.

“So that is the Black Bible's ability—freely remaking the world according to your own desires. You used that power to make all supernatural power on Itogami Island except yours disappear.”

Aya nodded without hesitation.

“That is...correct.”

“Why have you done such a thing?”

“To prove that it is not we witches who are cursed, but this world.”

“Prove?” Yukina asked, uncertain.

She couldn't comprehend what Aya Tokoyogi was really after. The annihilation of magical power meant Itogami Island would crumble. What would that prove?

“This is an...experiment. You, Yukina Himeragi, are the experiment's witness—its assessor.”

Aya smiled as she looked at Yukina's confusion. As she did so, the ground beneath the campus building creaked. Even then, Itogami Island's collapse continued.

“Please...no more. Have mercy...”

Sayaka was curled up into a ball on the dimly lit clinic room’s sofa.

Her white shirt was completely unbuttoned, almost completely exposing her lean side. Thanks to her skirt having been stripped off, her white skin shone under the moonlight from collar to thigh.

Sayaka resisted as Yuuma forced her down and moved to take off her bra. Yuuma smiled charmingly as she ran a fingertip up Sayaka’s slender collarbone.

“Ahh, Sayaka, you’re so pretty.”

Eeeek, was Sayaka’s silent reply, weakly shaking her head as her entire body shuddered.

“Why are you doing this to me?!”

“Well, you see, I’m embarrassed to be the only one dressed like this.”

Kojou, the odd man out, interjected with a pant, “...Not that you can call that an outfit to begin with...”

The white gown Yuuma wore was a hospital one. The cloth was tied in one place on each side; it was very close to a “naked apron.” Of course, she wasn’t wearing any underwear whatsoever. The only things hiding her bare skin were the bandages covering her entire body.

Yuuma was unapologetic. “Well, I busted right out of a hospital room. Can’t be helped.”

Then, she gave a furtive glance to the bust of her hospital gown, as if daring Kojou to look.

However, the man didn’t react. He was used to her teasing; she’d done it plenty of times since grade school.

“Sorry, Kirasaka,” Kojou apologized. “She’s been like this since *waaay* back.”

Sayaka glared resentfully at Kojou.

“...I’d been finding it strange all this time why a pretty girl like this would be a

close friend of yours, but now I get it. Birds of a feather flock together...!”

Why’d it turn into that? thought Kojou, as he heaved a lethargic sigh.

Yuuma finished stripping Sayaka’s bra off and reached toward Lustrous Scale.

“There’s no time, so let’s get this show on the road. I’m borrowing your sword, Sayaka.”

Then, she touched the blade to her own wrist without any hesitation. Kojou gasped.

“Yuuma?!”

“Aya Tokoyogi is using the Black Bible to erase supernatural power from all of Itogami Island. Demons lose their abilities and become normal people; the lives of homunculi and gravely ill patients reliant on spells for life support will be in danger if this continues much longer.”

Kojou looked at the fresh blood flowing from Yuuma’s wrist and weakly murmured, “Then...the same goes for you...”

Yuuma, the recipient of healing magic, was in the same boat. Yuuma’s grave, nearly fatal wounds had only been stabilized using the latest medical spells exclusive to MAR.

“There are exceptions, Kojou. Aya Tokoyogi left her own magical energy intact. Or rather, she couldn’t wipe her own power out because she’s the one activating the Bible.”

As Kojou lay on top of the bed, Yuuma flung herself all over him. The blood drops flowing from her wrist dropped into Kojou’s mouth.

“Because of that, and because I’m a copy of her, my power’s intact, too. Right now I don’t have the power to take on Aya Tokoyogi, but if you drink my blood...”

Realizing Yuuma’s objective, Sayaka forcefully sat up. “Then he might get his vampire powers back...?! But...”

The Black Bible couldn’t nullify Yuuma’s magical power. Just like how a vaccine was a weakened version of a virus, Kojou taking her blood into his own body might well be a catalyst enabling him to regain his vampiric powers.

But if Kojou had already completely lost his own supernatural ability, it was too late for him to drink Yuuma's blood, for nothing happened when a mere human being drank the blood of another.

However, Yuuma smiled warmly at their uneasy onlooker, as if trying to soothe her nerves. "It's all right. Yeah, maybe Aya Tokoyogi's trying to wipe out all supernatural abilities except her own...but Kojou is the Fourth Primogenitor. Do you understand what that means?"

"...A fourth primogenitor...something that should not exist in our world..."

The Fourth Primogenitor was an element alien to the world's very makeup. Yuuma was certain his body held supernatural factors not under the Black Bible's control. All that the magical power remaining in Yuuma's blood would do was to serve as the trigger to awaken it.

And as if to back up Yuuma's theory, Kojou's eyes turned crimson.

Like a ferocious beast, Kojou's sharp, elongated fangs mercilessly thrust into Yuuma's wounded neck. Yuuma gently embraced Kojou's back as he did so, closing her eyes in satisfaction. Yuuma's firm lips let out a frail, soft, lovely sigh.

As Sayaka gazed in shock at the sight of Kojou and Yuuma embracing each other, she gasped and partially regained her senses.

"Hold on a sec. What was the point of stripping my clothes off, then...?"

"That's—"

Yuuma was in the middle of a pained smile when she violently coughed up blood.

Her strength depleted, she collapsed then and there. Only now did Kojou fully realize just how badly she'd pushed herself to make it this far.

"Yuuma, you...!"

She'd used as much healing and buff spells as she could to force her body, which needed absolute rest, to move—all to save Kojou from danger. All to offer Kojou her very own blood—

Yuuma spoke in a faint, halting voice.

“Sorry, Kojou...the rest is up to you. Looks like I’m finally at my limits...”

Kojou bit his bloodstained lip and nodded.

“...I’ve got this. Have I ever let you down when you sent a pass my way?”

Kojou firmly pressed his own palm to Yuuma’s and strongly gripped it.

Anger surged through Kojou’s entire body—anger toward the crazy twist of fate that had put Yuuma through this and anger toward himself for having been unable to protect her.

Surely the magical energy Yuuma had provided through her blood ought to have caused the power of the Fourth Primogenitor, stolen by the Black Bible, to reawaken. The Black Bible no longer held any sway over him. But it wasn’t enough. It wasn’t enough power to dispel Kojou’s anger. He needed more blood —

“Kirasaka—!”

Sayaka, naked except for her white shirt, shuddered as her entire body froze.

“Y-yes?!”

Kojou, his body still wounded, rose up, grabbed Sayaka, and pulled her in close. His tone might have been strong, but the hands with which he touched her were tender. His grip was gentle, as if not to frighten Sayaka with her fear of men, handling her as delicately as fine china—but still very bold where it counted.

Such an artful maneuver was clearly different from the normal Kojou, so unused to women.

Perhaps a memory from a previous Fourth Primogenitor that slept within his blood was somehow influencing his behavior.

“W-w-wait a minute. I—I’m not emotionally prepared for...I haven’t even had a shower, and Yuuma’s watching...*aah*?!”

In spite of Sayaka’s desperate excuses, her resistance was far weaker than her words.

Kojou’s fingertips touched Sayaka’s defenseless flesh. Strength drained from

her entire body.

Kojou gently sank his fangs into Sayaka's pale skin.

"O-ow! Not...there...I'm not...*nn!*"

Though she initially groaned in pain, she, too, let out a frail sigh, allowing Kojou to support her full weight.

It was the second time Kojou had tasted her blood, but her reaction was that of an innocent virgin. That was just fine with him. The body of the Fourth Primogenitor was very fond of her powerful spirit medium blood.

Kojou whispered into Sayaka's ear while her eyes were closed.

"...n't let anyone..."

Sayaka, her pale flesh flushed and her eyes moist, looked back at Kojou.

"K-Kojou Akatsuki?"

"I won't let anyone else die, Kirasaka."

Sayaka's reply was straightforward, even fawning.

"...I know."

Kojou continued to embrace her as he put a hand to his chest. The wound from Aya Tokoyogi's Guardian impaling him was already completely healed.

However, the wound in his right breast was intact.

This was the stab wound from Yukina's Snowdrift Wolf. So wounds inflicted by that spear indeed couldn't be healed, even by the power of the Fourth Primogenitor—?

But someone inside of Kojou had a reply...:

Yes. This is true. But it is also mistaken. You see only the flesh. Because you see only the flesh, it fails you. Vampires are beyond the boundaries of life and death. They straddle the border between existence and nonexistence. You need but return to the mist of primordial chaos from which emerged all things, holy and unholy, living and dead alike—

Sayaka gasped in shock. A silver mist had appeared around Kojou, enveloping

him.

“Kojou Akatsuki, what...are you...?”

Kojou’s physical body was changing into the silver mist from whence it came. Finally, as the mist covered Kojou, the injured Yuuma, and Sayaka, too, they seemed to melt into it...

Now Kojou understood.

“I get it...so that’s how it is, Aurora... This is *number four*, ain’t it?!”

Beast Vassal Number Four had already been awakened since the moment he’d been impaled by Yukina’s spear. And having emerged to save Kojou’s physical body from annihilation, it ran amok, leaving him stuck that way.

The fierce sense of fatigue he’d felt was the same as when he’d used his vampiric powers to summon multiple Beast Vassals at once. The unhealing wound in Kojou’s breast was itself the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassal Number Four.

Kojou solemnly raised his voice. “Kojou Akatsuki, heir to the bloodline Kaleid Blood, releases thee from thy bonds...!”

The mist that enveloped him grew even thicker. Kojou himself was transforming into mist.

“C’mon over, Beast Vassal Number Four, Natra Cinereus—!”

Finally, mist covered the entire building; the contours of the entire world grew vague. Silver chaos blotted out buildings, people, the air itself—everything.

Sayaka’s eyes opened wide as she looked above her.

“A Beast Vassal...of mist...?!”

The shadow of a giant Beast Vassal floated up from within the thick, silver mist. The creature’s entire body was covered in a gray carapace; its thick, ominous armor made it a veritable moving fortress. However, the only thing that came out of the gaps in the shell was the same heavy, silver mist.

The shelled beast with a body of mist looked like a ghost—

The world shrouded in silver mist shuddered from the monster's roar.

4

Silver mist enveloped the artificial city that was quietly collapsing.

Mist was nothing strange on Itogami Island, floating on the Pacific Ocean. Depending on the season, sea fog became a hindrance to traffic from time to time. However, *this* mist was different from such mundane atmospheric phenomena.

The origin point of the silver mist was the city itself. Buildings, transportation facilities, the artificial ground, and the people themselves who lived there turned to mist as the world melted around them.

From the outside, it looked like the fog had shut the entire city within itself.

Someone on the coastline observed the scene, one full of dense magical energy. Sitting on the edge of bedrock covered in rubble was a male high school student in uniform. His hair was short and combed back. He was Motoki Yaze, Kojou and Asagi's classmate—and a spy dispatched by the Gigafloat Management Corporation.

“—Looks like the collapse of the island's stopped.”

He was on the small island called the prison barrier. Only a short distance away from Itogami Island, it had so far escaped the effect of the Black Bible.

A girl standing behind Yaze whispered, “A Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, yes?”

She was also a high school student, but one who wore glasses and had a book under her arm. Her uniform, like Yaze's, came from Saikai Academy, but she had an atmosphere of calm wafting around her that made her seem older.

Yaze nodded at her. “The cliché is for vamps to turn to mist and run from battle, not to turn a whole island into mist. Thanks to that, we've been saved this time around...but...”

“It proves all over again that he could wipe this island off the map at any

moment he pleases, does it not?”

The boy seemed to suppress his own feelings on the matter as he gave a sober scoff. “Hmph. Was this part of your plan, too?”

A short time earlier, Itogami Island, robbed of its magic, had been on the verge of collapse. But now that everything had been turned to mist, gravity ceased to affect it; since there was nothing solid, the strength of the materials holding it together was no longer a concern. Perhaps it might be said that one could not destroy that which was intangible.

“I had heard that Kojou Akatsuki was an incomplete vampire who couldn’t pull off misting,” the schoolgirl said. “To think that his first transformation into mist would be on such a grand scale...the Fourth Primogenitor is very much the golden child of calamity.”

“Pretty much.”

Yaze didn’t dispute her words in any way.

Use of transformation into mist was pretty much exclusively for blood relatives of Old Guard vampires and above. However, there was no record of Kojou Akatsuki having turned to mist before that very day.

Perhaps the very reason for not turning to mist on a whim was that a single slip could wipe away the entire city. It was the kind of insanity that suited the Fourth Primogenitor well.

However, it was that insane power that had saved the Demon Sanctuary from peril. Kojou Akatsuki probably wasn’t even aware of what he’d done.

Yaze glanced up at the girl with a sharp look.

“More than that, I wanna ask what the hell is going on here. You people knew darn well why Aya Tokoyogi was so hung up on a ‘useless’ grimoire like the Black Bible, didn’t you? What’s her objective here?”

The girl smirked as she shook her head. “Yes, I wonder. Perhaps she desires to save the world?”

“What the heck does *that* mean?”

As Yaze snapped in annoyance, a self-deprecating, desolate smile came over

his companion.

“By that I mean...the witch is frightened, just as we are frightened,” she said.

Without a sound, the girl turned her gaze toward Itogami Island, now shrouded in mist under the sunless sky, and began walking toward the sea.

From behind her, Yaze asked, “Wanna watch till the credits roll?”

The girl shook her head shortly.

“Unfortunately, I have other business to attend to.”

The glasses girl headed toward a rock wall where a small coast guard patrol boat awaited. When she got there, the sailors dutifully attended to her, guiding her onto the boat.

Yaze’s shoulders slumped in exasperation as he watched the girl go.

“A cold fish as always... Well, that is part of her charm, I suppose,” he muttered as he shifted his gaze toward Itogami Island once more.

The silver mist enveloping the man-made island silently covered the moonlight-bathed sea.

5

Yukina was still trapped in the birdcage.

“What do you mean, this world is cursed?” she asked the fire-eyed witch.

The woman, listening with comfort to the sounds of Itogami Island’s collapse, looked at Yukina with delight as she smiled.

“Do you not find it...strange, Sword Shaman?”

Aya Tokoyogi’s monochrome robe fluttered as she turned to the tiny prison she’d constructed.

“I ask you, do you believe the world to be correct as it is? This world, where vampires and beast men strut about, and humans employ magic without a second...thought?”

The question made Yukina slightly uneasy. She thought it strange that a witch

like Aya Tokoyogi would embrace doubts about her very existence.

“...There are many mysteries that remain concerning the rules that govern the world, but the fact that magic and demons exist is undeniable. In the first place, this Demon Sanctuary exists to research those mysteries, does it not?”

“You are a fine pupil, Sword Shaman.”

There was a faint hint of sarcasm in Aya Tokoyogi’s tone.

“Do you not question why magic and demons exist, then? A single vampire is granted the power to destroy a giant city—can you really call such an unbalanced state how the world should truly be?”

“That’s...”

Yukina’s words caught on her tongue. It was a doubt natural for anyone familiar with the menace of a primogenitor to hold. Why were they, and they alone, granted such titanic might—?

The fire-eyed witch shifted her gaze outside the window. From the side, her face brimmed with great intellect, not at all the image Yukina had of an inhumane sorcerous criminal.

“I have always believed that magic and demons are not things that should exist except in human imagination. I believe that the only proper world is one where they do not exist.”

Yukina glared at the witch. “And yet supernatural powers do exist. Even if that is some kind of mistake...”

The corners of Aya’s lips rose into a smile. “Indeed. Therefore, as I have stated, this world is cursed.”

“Perhaps you are correct. However, this is the world humanity has lived in for thousands of years.”

Upon hearing Yukina’s words, the fire-eyed witch inclined her head, demeanor serious.

“For thousands of...years. Is that truly so?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Are you familiar with the so-called five-minute hypothesis?”

Yukina shook her head. Those were strange words, ones she had never heard in her life.

Casually, without a hint of mockery, the woman went on to explain: “The hypothesis states that the world, as it now exists, came into being a mere five minutes ago and never existed previously; that someone created human memory, history, records of the past, buildings—everything—but five short minutes ago.”

Yukina mixed in a sigh as she retorted, “...Then it’s only a hypothesis...a thought experiment that can be neither proven nor disproven.”

She could not scientifically refute the hypothesis. However, at the same time, there was no way to prove it was the truth, either. She did not think it bore any meaning beyond a philosophical exercise.

However, Aya gave her an amused smile, as if she’d expected that rebuttal.

“Certainly, it is a hypothesis. However, there is a way to prove it. Surely the fact that I am recreating the world as I desire establishes beyond a doubt that it is possible?”

Yukina’s cheeks went pale.

“You don’t mean...you’re using the Black Bible to...?!?”

“I am,” the fire-eyed witch declared without hesitation. “My rewriting of the world according to my desires is an experiment for that very purpose.”

The young woman’s shoulders shook as a chill shot up her spine.

Erasing all supernatural power was not the objective of Aya Tokoyogi, the Witch of the Notaria.

Her objective was to rewrite the very world into the shape *she believed to be correct*.

“Why subject Itogami Island to such a dangerous experiment...?!?”

Aya’s response was to explain the matter as if she found it a trifling one. “This is a Demon Sanctuary—a man-made island that would not even exist without

magic. In other words, it is a symbol of the mad world. Surely there is no more suitable stage?”

Her expression seemed to say, *Why ask me something so perfectly obvious?*

Yukina glared at her with pent-up rage.

“And you would kill hundreds of thousands of people for the sake of that?”

“It is what they deserve for mocking us witches as abominations and using us as they...please!” the fire-eyed witch shouted with sudden vehemence.

It was the first time Yukina had seen emotion in those red eyes.

“That is how you see me, is it not, Sword Shaman? Do you even comprehend how they have treated my friend, Natsuki Minamiya...!”

“Aya Tokoyogi...you...”

Yukina looked at Aya, her breath ragged from irrepressible hatred, in bewilderment.

Aya had not killed Natsuki during the fight at the prison barrier. Though she’d stolen Natsuki’s memories, she’d made no sign of pursuing Natsuki when she fled to safety. Even now, with Natsuki captured in the form of the powerless Sana, Aya had left her alone.

Perhaps Aya Tokoyogi had not wanted to fight Natsuki until the very end. Perhaps, even while held in the prison barrier, she’d been concerned for Natsuki, left behind all alone.

Perhaps, to Aya, Natsuki truly was a friend.

Somehow calming her breathing, Aya returned to her original, composed tone of voice and spoke.

“The Black Bible required the ley line spiritual energy that flows into this Demon Sanctuary and borrows the power of the stars. I remained in obscurity these past ten years to await the proper alignment of the stars. When this night ends, and the Hollow Eve Festival with it, my world shall cease to be.”

This was unexpectedly useful information to Yukina and her allies. When morning came and the heavenly bodies shifted, the Black Bible would cease to

function. However, she didn't think Kojou, gravely wounded and without his vampiric powers, could last that long. For that matter, she didn't know if Itogami Island, in the process of collapse, could hold out, either.

"Of course, this island should sink into the sea before then. Experimental results of at least such a scale are necessary to prove that my hypothesis is indeed correct."

"Ugh," Yukina groaned as she clutched her spear. However, trapped in the birdcage as she was, the Sword Shaman had no way to stop Aya.

Watching Yukina poise her spear, the fire-eyed witch suddenly altered her tone.

"That spear...the Schneewaltzer, is said to...nullify magical power and rend through any barrier. But is that the truth?"

Yukina gave her a thorny look, taking this as a slight against her beloved weapon.

"...What are you talking about?"

"Rather than nullify magic, might it not *return the world to its proper form*?" Aya stated with an air of composure. "I do not believe the might to nullify even a primogenitor's abilities can be explained in any other fashion."

Her fiery eyes gazed upon Yukina with careful scrutiny.

"If that is so," Aya continued, "who are you, who can wield it at will? Are you truly a human of this world?"

"Is wild speculation like that the reason you brought me here?" Yukina replied, though her voice was far calmer than she felt.

She'd been wondering the whole time why she'd been abducted; she finally had the answer to that riddle. Aya Tokoyogi was interested in her, the wielder of the Schneewaltzer. Now that she thought about it, the witch had shown interest in Yukina's spear even during their first encounter at the prison barrier.

"Speculation, you say?" Aya mocked. "Tell me, then, why you alone have escaped the effect of the Black Bible and are still able to employ ritual magic?"

Yukina was shocked into silence.

Her doubts grew ever so slightly. Perhaps what the fire-eyed witch had said—about her and about the world—was the truth...?

Yukina's voice turned hard.

"So...you are saying that this world's current state was created by someone?"

"I am. Though I would argue that a more proper term would be...‘cursed.’"

"Then who did such a thing?"

"I know not." Aya bluntly shook her head. "Perhaps a being that can create worlds in his own image should be called God, but in this case, it's surely nothing so enlightened."

It was then that she seemed to remember something and smiled pleasantly at Yukina.

"It is said that vampire primogenitors were born by being cursed by the gods themselves."

"What of it...?"

"If that is so, who or what is the fourth of the primogenitors, a being that ought not exist in this world...? By whose will does such a being exist? Perhaps understanding that might shed light upon the secrets of this w—"

Aya's soliloquy broke off. She looked outside in clear surprise.

Yukina, too, realized why Aya was in shock.

"...This magical energy?!"

The very air inside the school shuddered from a surge of incredibly dense magical power—air governed by Aya's world.

"Insanity," spat Aya as she teleported to the schoolyard, with the birdcage holding Yukina in tow.

A silver mist had the campus completely surrounded.

Dense mist obstructed their view; they could see nothing beyond it whatsoever. No, that wasn't it—the city itself had *turned* to mist.

With her Spirit Sight, Yukina's eyes made out the contours of a monster

lurking in the center of the fog.

It was a ghostlike shelled beast without physical form. The mist was a vampire's Beast Vassal—a Beast Vassal of mist, wrapping itself around the entire island.

The Demon Sanctuary only contained a single being served by Beast Vassals of such a scale.

Obstructed by invisible walls, the particulate cloud had not yet entered the school grounds. The wards Aya had deployed were blocking its entry.

However, a crack suddenly ran down the thick wall. The barrier and the very space it occupied were being ripped apart as someone invaded Aya Tokoyogi's world.

“C'mon over, Beast Vassal Number Three, Al-Meissa Mercury!”

It was the dimension eater, the being that consumed space itself. Employing the quicksilver-colored two-headed dragon and himself wearing a bloodstained parka, the World's Mightiest Vampire breached the walls around the school—

Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor.

6

The giant silver dragon with two heads bit apart the birdcages holding Yukina and Sana.

Yukina desperately fended off the remainder of the attack with her spear. She was grateful that the barrage had shattered her cage, but it was undoubtedly excessive.

“Sen...pai...!”

Yukina's mutter had more of a hint of reproach than relief. That Beast Vassal, able to erase space belonging to any dimension, was one of the worst in the Fourth Primogenitor's repertoire. It wasn't the sort of thing you let loose willy-nilly.

Unsurprisingly, even Kojou recalled the danger it posed to them and quickly

dematerialized the Beast Vassal. The dragon gradually vanished as it made a roar of displeasure, as if saying it had not yet had its fill.

Aya Tokoyogi's fiery eyes narrowed and glared hatefully at Kojou.

"How dare you consume my wards and invade the core of my world? So this is how it feels to have one's own bedroom trodden...upon."

Kojou turned to face her gaze head-on and smiled fearlessly, his white fangs bared.

"Just so you know, this is *our* school. From our point of view, Aya Tokoyogi, *you're* the trespasser."

"...Nn!"

Kojou's words had shaken Aya slightly. It had been ten years since she and Natsuki had last exchanged words at this very school, but perhaps it hadn't really sunk in until that moment. As Yukina shielded Sana, who was down on her knees, she raised her head when she heard Sayaka call out her name:

"Yukina! Are you all right? She didn't do anything strange to you?"

Sayaka had entered the schoolyard while lending her shoulder to the injured Yuuma.

Yuuma looked defenseless with only a paper-thin patient's gown covering her; Sayaka's clothing was disheveled, like someone's after an amorous encounter. Yukina could largely piece together what had happened from their external appearance alone. And for no reason, merely imagining such inappropriate behavior brought pangs to Yukina's chest.

She felt genuinely grateful for Sayaka and Yuuma coming to rescue her, no matter what they might be dressed like. She was very glad that Kojou was alive. Even so, she wondered why the annoyance and sadness in her just wouldn't go away.

Utterly refusing to recognize that a watcher like her could experience the emotion known as jealousy, Yukina focused on just the facts, stating casually, "Sayaka...your shirt's buttoned wrong..."

"Eh?!"

Sayaka, her cheeks bursting red, hastily put a hand over her cleavage. Sayaka was still like that when Yukina handed Sana over to her and adopted a posture meant to shield them.

Sayaka had not regained the powers stolen from her by the Black Bible. With Yuuma now too injured to move on her own, only Yukina and Kojou had any means with which to oppose Aya Tokoyogi.

For her part, the witch called out the name as if it was cursed.

“Yuuma...is it?”

It was the name of the “daughter” the fire-eyed witch had prepared as a tool for her escape from the prison barrier. Her role complete, Aya had tossed her aside and had probably forgotten that she’d even existed, but Kojou had saved her.

And now, they were here to destroy Aya’s plan, a fact that made Aya highly indignant.

“I see. You drank the blood of the doll based on me. That’s how you regained your demonic power.”

As the witch shook with rage, Kojou watched her coldly.

“Yeah. Thanks to that, I’m about to kick your ass. Thanks to your usin’ Yuuma, she’s all a mess...Natsuki’s been turned into a grade schooler...Asagi, Astarte, everyone on the island who wanted to have fun at the festival, they’re all sufferin’ ’cause of you.”

Without warning, Kojou marched forward, closing the distance between him and Aya Tokoyogi. His body was emitting and being enveloped by lightning and its gale of wind. The Beast Vassals sleeping within the blood of the Fourth Primogenitor were reacting to Kojou’s anger.

“So you’ve *really* pissed me off. I don’t care if you’re Yuuma’s mom, and it’s got nothin’ to do with you bein’ a prison barrier inmate. I don’t care about the why! You’ve hurt lots of important friends of mine! From here on, this is *my* fight!”

“Nng...!”

The beautiful face of Aya Tokoyogi twisted in hostility, even as she bore the brunt of Kojou's rage head-on.

Even though Kojou had recovered his magical strength, the Black Bible's power was still intact. Furthermore, this was the very center of the world that Aya had created. Kojou's power was half-depleted, while Aya's power was at its zenith. Even against a vampire primogenitor, surely Aya, as she was now, had every chance of victory, and she was well aware of that... But—

It was Yukina who wedged herself into their standoff.

"No, senpai. This is *our* fight."

Kojou looked at Yukina in surprise. Normally, it was Yukina who was counseling Kojou to use restraint, but this time, she was trying to stop Aya of her own free will.

Yukina glared at the witch with sadness.

"You said that the people of this world look down upon witches and use your kind like tools. What is your treatment of Yuuma, then?!"

Perhaps the fire-eyed witch really did want to change the world. If supernatural power vanished from the face of the earth, there would no longer be any reason to fear witches. Perhaps that was indeed her wish.

But in the process, she was hurting people weaker than herself and walking all over them.

Yukina couldn't accept that as just. Someone had to stop her.

"If people curse you, it's *not* because you're a witch. No one will accept you so long as you use the fact you're a witch as an excuse to hurt others. Shut off the Black Bible and surrender immediately!"

Aya gazed intently at her, anguish in her eyes. "To think I am being scolded by a brat of so few years, as if she knows of what she speaks."

The witch's expression, filled with despair and denial, was like the one she'd worn ten years prior, when Natsuki had decided to part ways with her.

"However, do not forget that you are still in *my* world!"

Aya used a fingertip to air-write symbols. From that twinkle, she summoned human silhouettes out of thin air one after another. Kojou knew the faces of a number of them: Bruté Dumblegraff the Georgius; Shtola D; Gigliola Ghirardi; Kiliga Gilika; the red-and-black witch team, the Meyer Sisters...

“You recreated the sorcerous criminals from memories...?!” Yukina gasped in shock.

These were no doubt replicas of the fiendish criminals Aya had summoned from her own memories. The Black Bible’s power to rewrite the world according to one’s desires apparently included creating humans themselves. These were dolls that would move according to Aya Tokoyogi’s will.

However, they were mere soulless shadows of the origins. Even if they had abilities identical to those of the originals, their threat level was still far lower... for there was no reason to hold back against illusions.

“You really think a bunch of cookie cutouts are gonna stop me, Miss Monochrome?! C’mon over, Al-Nasl Minium—!”

The new, giant Beast Vassal that Kojou summoned bore an incandescent, scarlet mane and twin horns. It was a formidable mass vibration that wavered like a mirage.

The two horns protruding from its head resonated like a tuning fork, releasing a high-pitched shock wave. The shattering of all the school’s windows was no more than a side effect. After that, the Beast Vassal roared, its shock wave turning into cannonballs that poured down on the prisoners surrounding Kojou and the others.

The knight’s sword, the invisible psychic slash, the Old Guard’s Beast Vassal, even the Efreet—all were powerless before the bicorn’s destructive rampage. With a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor released without restraint, overwhelming power poured upon them, annihilating the shadows in a single blow.

It looked more like being mowed down by a giant tornado than anything one could call *combat*.

The incandescent bicorn, governing violent winds and shock waves, was

destruction incarnate. It was something that had little use outside of destroying a giant military force. At this rate, Saikai Academy's campus building would itself be blown away—

The instant the thought crossed Kojou's mind, a series of shining symbols emerged out of thin air and blocked the bicorn's blast winds. That momentary opening was enough for Kojou to bring his Beast Vassal, on the verge of going berserk, back under full control.

"Her magic symbol wall, huh...?!" scoffed Kojou.

Even as he thought, *Just in the nick of time*, Kojou's expression hardened. Aya's power had suppressed his Beast Vassal. That meant that, in her world, Aya could indeed wield power on par with a goddess.

However, Aya's face revealed no excess confidence, for Kojou was not her only opponent in this fight.

Yukina's silver spear lashed out toward the wall of symbols surrounding Aya.

"Snowdrift Wolf—!"

The wall that had endured even a Beast Vassal's onslaught popped like a balloon, vanishing that very instant. Yukina wielded a purifying spear that could rend any barrier. A magical barrier could not fend off her attacks.

Knowing this, Aya drew new magical symbols into thin air. In response, a transparent, glass-like wall appeared before Yukina's eyes.

"A crystal wall?!" the Sword Shaman exclaimed as the tip of her spear bounced off it.

Even her spear, able to nullify all magic, was powerless against a simple physical wall. Aya, the creator of that world, was able to summon solid matter as she wished.

Kojou ferociously bared his fangs. "Get back, Yukina—!"

A mere wall was no match for a Beast Vassal. Unable to withstand the bicorn's ferocious oscillation wave, the thick crystal wall shattered.

"The primogenitor Beast Vassal defeats the physical wall... The Sword Shaman's spear smashes the magical...wall. To think a pair of heretics rejecting

my world would be so troublesome. Very well...”

A black tentacle sprung out of thin air from behind Yukina and wrapped tightly around her.

“Oh n—?!”

The knotted tentacle that bound her entire body was identical to the one Yuuma’s Guardian had once used to attack her. Unable to move her spear, Yukina was utterly incapable of freeing herself—!

“Unfortunately, I shall help myself to your memories, Sword Shaman! L’Ombre!”

Aya Tokoyogi called forth her own Guardian, a faceless knight encased in jet-black armor.

The black knight drew its blade and sliced toward the immobile Yukina. It was just like when Natsuki had been turned into a grade schooler. She was trying to render Yukina powerless by robbing her of her personal history.

Kojou sprinted toward his comrade. “Himeragi!”

His Beast Vassal, overpowered as it was, could not save Yukina without harming her. However, the black knight’s attack reached her quicker than Kojou’s feet could.

Just as deep despair struck Kojou, he heard a loud *clang*, like metal violently colliding against metal. The black knight’s sword bounced back.

A golden gauntlet had appeared out of thin air, repelling the black knight’s attack.

“A golden Guardian...?!” exclaimed Aya.

A new witch’s Guardian had emerged from space that wavered like a beautiful ripple. It was humanoid in shape, its body encased in golden armor.

Its malevolent, giant form looked more like a demon than a knight. It was a clockwork demonic knight.

Aya heard a lisping, adorable voice from behind her.

“So you finally whipped that book out. I’ve been waiting for this moment,

Aya!”

The master of the golden Guardian stood behind her: a little girl in an extravagant dress. However, the expression on her face was full of arrogance and charisma that completely belied her childish appearance.

“Natsuki?!” Aya shouted. “You’ve regained your ma—”

“I’ll be taking my time back now.”

Without warning, Natsuki Minamiya, in Sana form, snapped her fingers. Countless chains shot out of nowhere, wrapping around Aya’s arms and ripping her grimoire out of her hands.

Taking advantage of the slackening of the tentacle holding her, Yukina repositioned her spear. She could only move her right arm freely, but she nonetheless swung Snowdrift Wolf and swept away the tentacle holding her captive.

“...So you have your magic power back, Natsuki?” Kojou asked, gazing at the little girl displaying cool composure and a puffed-out chest.

Natsuki’s lips curled up the tiniest bit in apparent delight. “I have just enough saved up to use spells temporarily, all thanks to some primogenitor who happened to bleed all over the bath from his nose. I really must thank Asagi later...”

Kojou spontaneously clutched his head.

“You still have your memories from grade-schooler mode?!”

The blood from Kojou’s nose left in the group bath on the *Oceanus Grave II* was full of the Fourth Primogenitor’s magical power, however faint. Apparently, while immersed in the bath, Natsuki had absorbed that power to regain some of her energy. “My blood ain’t a bath bomb,” mumbled Kojou in visible displeasure when Yukina sullenly glared at him. Apparently, her sharp intuition had quickly deduced what made Kojou bleed in the first place...

Aya stood, dumbfounded, as she gazed at Natsuki, now recovered, and her Guardian. She hadn’t gotten the memo that Natsuki was using a backup to restore her memories.

Natsuki had started restoring her memory before the Black Bible had activated. And now that she'd regained them, the Black Bible's magic nullification no longer affected her, because it was through Natsuki's memories that the Black Bible was being read.



However, Natsuki had pretended to be a powerless little girl to keep the wool pulled over Aya Tokoyogi's eyes, making her careless while Natsuki herself waited for a chance to regain the time that had been stripped from her.

For a single moment, the shaken, fire-eyed witch looked at Natsuki with something like pity.

"Yukina Himeragi, distract Aya Tokoyogi—I only need a moment. You! Ponytail! Is Aya's daughter still conscious?"

"P-ponytail...?!"

Though not exactly fond of the nickname Natsuki had pinned on her, Sayaka immediately nodded.

Apparently, Natsuki remembered that the only one who could save the wounded Yuuma was another witch—Natsuki.

"So you turn against me to the very end, Natsuki?!" Aya roared bitterly.

Along with the lethal aura that erupted from her, countless symbols drew themselves in the air. Illusions of sorcerous criminals emerged from them, all at once.

When it came to witches using spatial control magic, Natsuki was without peer. Aya, who specialized in the manipulation of written symbols, couldn't lock on to Natsuki's coordinates.

"Blow 'em away, Al-Nasl Minium—!"

Kojou's Beast Vassal went about annihilating the illusions Aya had created with glee. Then, it brandished its twin horns and charged toward the defenseless fire-eyed witch.

Aya redeployed her wall of symbols to defend against the assault. However, Kojou dematerialized the Beast Vassal just short of colliding with the wall. The incandescent bicorn had been a decoy for drawing Aya's attention. Breaching the wall and leaping through was not the Beast Vassal, but a girl wielding a silver spear.

"Roaring Thunder!"

Yukina's right leg leaped up and caught Aya Tokoyogi's chin.

With the witch's attention focused on deploying the wall, she had no way of evading the attack. With the defensive magic enveloping her breached, Aya's brain was scrambled by Yukina's ritual energy-infused kick.

Aya lost consciousness for one brief moment, severing her link with the Guardian that served her. Not letting that moment go to waste, Natsuki unleashed her magical chains.

"Faceless knight protecting the spiraling abyss, emerge from thy prison of frozen anguish—"

Silver chains bound the black knight's entire body.

The black knight thrashed violently to shake off the chains hindering it, acting like a wounded beast. However, the magic-infused chains did not break; instead, they ate into the black knight's armor.

Natsuki continued to chant her spell.

"My name is Void. With the Eternal Flame, I burn away thy Oathbreaker Curse. Shatter thy black-blooded yoke and return to thy proper form. Raise thy sword for she who is blessed by the spirits, the Blue Maiden!"

Natsuki channeled her magical energy through the chains; it visibly coursed through the black knight's entire body like electric shocks. The armor encasing the Guardian's form cracked all over; from beneath, a new suit of armor emerged.

Blue armor like the deep sea.

Kojou's group instinctively understood.

The curse Aya Tokoyogi had cast upon the Guardian had been lifted.

"Yuuma!" Kojou called.

That was the most Natsuki could accomplish.

Only one more thing was needed to save Yuuma: the will to sever herself from her mother's control. The will to live, even if Yuuma knew her own existence was without "meaning."

Something in Yuuma's hazy consciousness caused her to shout.

"Le Bleu!"

The now-blue knight howled. The ripped-up spiritual pathways had been restored; her connection to her Guardian had been reestablished.

Yuuma had regained her powers as a witch.

In turn, that meant Aya Tokoyogi had lost her own Guardian.

Blood dripped from the corner of Aya's mouth as she panted and spat out, "So the doll that I created defies my rule...!"

It was the same thing she had herself done to Yuuma. Her spiritual pathways had been ripped apart from having her Guardian forcibly taken away.

As the fire-eyed witch fell to her knees, Natsuki looked down at her and calmly stated, "It's over, Aya... Return to the prison barrier. Your dream is over."

As she was the mastermind plotting the destruction of Itogami Island and thereby plunging its entire population into crisis, Aya's crimes were most grave. The circumstances differed from when Eustach had illegally entered Itogami City and caused an incident. It was barely conceivable that the sentence awaiting her would be as *lenient* as the death penalty.

But if she was sealed inside the prison barrier, she would be beyond the reach of the Gigafloat Management Corporation. It was the best option Natsuki had for the sake of her old friend.

Even understanding how Natsuki felt, Aya slowly shook her head.

"Solitary confinement? To think that my turning on LCO's sorcerers would come back to haunt me like this..."

Aya herself had already cut ties with the organization she had governed, the criminal organization LCO. She didn't need them anymore, regardless of whether her experiment succeeded or failed.

But as a result, she'd lost a great many usable pawns. Aya had few options left.

But even though she was backed into a corner, Aya said with thorough

amusement, “However, Fourth Primogenitor, surely you must be suffering, controlling other Beast Vassals while having summoned one powerful enough to support the entire island. How much longer before you lose control? If I can endure until then, I win. The effect is the same.”

Kojou silently grimaced. He didn’t care to admit it, but Aya was right. Just like his other Beast Vassals, Natra Cinereus, the Beast Vassal of mist, was frighteningly difficult to control. One slip and it’d completely run amok.

At the moment, he had it behaving while supporting the man-made island, but that wouldn’t last for long. If that Beast Vassal went berserk, no doubt Itogami Island would literally go up in a puff of smoke.

Yukina posed her spear and stated, “We shall defeat you before that happens.”

Aya narrowed her eyes and smiled.

“Can you do it, Sword Shaman?”

Her expression somehow seemed darker than before.

Realizing that something very wrong was happening to Aya, Natsuki became visibly shaken, her tiny body shuddering. She shouted up, her voice almost shrieking: “Stop! Don’t do it, Aya!”

The next moment, Aya Tokoyogi’s entire body was enveloped by fire. It was not fire in a physical sense; these were ominous, black flames that seemed like they came from the pits of hell itself.

Aya’s body, completely enveloped in flame, was no longer visible from the outside. Only her fiery eyes were visible, blazing amid the darkness. The magical power trickling out from her became a frightening torrent, now rivaling that of Kojou’s own Beast Vassals.

“Wh-what the hell...is this?!” Kojou shouted.

Sayaka, the only one observing the battle with a cool head, was the first to identify the calamity. “She’s losing her soul!” she shouted. “It’s a witch’s final stage—her soul is consumed by her devil, while her flesh becomes that of a true demon—”

Natsuki bit her lip in despair.

“...At this point, no one can stop it. Aya is beyond saving...”

No one could appreciate the fear of losing one’s own soul more than a fellow witch.

Kojou nervously clenched his fists. “No way...”

His control over his Beast Vassals was at its limit. If they couldn’t stop Aya then and there, Itogami Island would be destroyed by Kojou’s own hand.

However, now that she’d become a full demon, Aya’s magical power was off the scale. How could he defeat a monster like that if he had such a hard time even keeping his Beast Vassals on a leash—?

As Kojou brooded over the matter, Yukina gripped his hand firmly.

“No, senpai. We will stop her. For Yuuma’s sake, too—”

Yukina’s eyes were filled with unshakable determination. She knew what she had to fight for.

They couldn’t abandon Aya with the injured Yuuma watching. They couldn’t let the mother perish before the eyes of the daughter who’d spent a lifetime waiting to meet her.

Yukina was functionally an orphan; she had not known her own mother. That was why she wanted to save Aya. It was thinking well suited to the considerate, deeply serious Yukina.

“Guess there’s no helpin’ it, then,” Kojou replied, gripping her hand back.

That was enough to tell each other how they felt: *Whatever it takes*.

“She herself stated,” began Yukina, “Snowdrift Wolf does not nullify magical energy, but rather, it returns the world to its proper state. If that is so—”

“Got it. I’m about at my limit, anyway.”

“Yes. It’s now or never!”

Yukina raised her spear and charged.

The being that was once Aya Tokoyogi traced symbols with her fire-enveloped

fingertip. From these, she created amorphous monsters not known to them. They were probably creatures from the demonic realm.

The monsters rushed toward Yukina, as if to block the witch from her.

“C’mon over, Regulus Aurum—!”

It was a lightning-shrouded golden lion that blew the amorphous monsters away, the fifth Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor. Its lightning, infused with incredible demonic power, burned the creatures to ash. They’d blazed a trail for Yukina.

The girl danced through, her silver spear held high.

“I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee.”

As she made her solemn chant, her spear was enveloped by a white glow.

The witch losing her soul stopped moving, as if she feared that glow.

“O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!”

A single flash of the silver spear bisected the black flames that enveloped the witch.

Aya’s body, bathed in the magical light, lost her divine power. This also meant that the pact with her devil had been broken. Her corrupted witch’s body had been severed from the demonic realm.

From behind, they heard the lisping voice of a very young girl...

“Well done, my students!”

Silver chains shot out from thin air to pluck Aya’s body right out of the black flames.

Having lost their reason for manifesting in the world of men, the demonic flames twisted and burned savagely but for a single moment before puffing out and vanishing.

Then the ward enveloping the school and the effects of the Black Bible vanished.

Kojou and the others were instantly assaulted by a feeling akin to color

returning to the world. Magic had returned to Itogami Island. With that, Kojou dismissed his mist Beast Vassal.

The silver fog slowly lifted, and the entirety of Itogami Island and the blue sea that surrounded it came into view.

Kojou groaned as the first dazzling rays of light poked over the horizon.

The rays of the morning sun shone upon their tired, beat-up bodies.

At some point, night had yielded to dawn.



OUTRO

At the very center of Itogami Island, there was a small museum inside the building called Keystone Gate.

Its proper name was the Demon Sanctuary Museum. The facility served as a showcase for the fruits of Itogami Island's Demon Sanctuary scientific labors, oriented toward tourists. It sold pictures of Senra Itogami, designer of the man-made island, and mock-ups of the island itself; packages of commercial products developed in the Demon Sanctuary; replicas of Island Guard gear and famous sorcerous devices; and so forth—the abundance of rare goods one would never catch sight of on the mainland made it one of Itogami Island's most famous tourist attractions.

But there was one section that was not open to the public.

In one corner of the museum, there stood a single, aged spear inside a glass display case. Above and below the full weapon were a variety of large spear tips. The spear had an odd design, as if two shorter spears had been rammed together to form this one.

The display case did not list the tool's name or its history. Secured by several stout wires, it was as if the weapon locked up in the museum had been sealed away by someone.

A lone, youthful man looked up at that spear.

The young man wore glasses and had a composed, intellectual air about him. He had a gray manacle around his left forearm. This proved he was the last of those that had escaped from the prison barrier.

"...It would seem the mist has lifted."

As he gazed at his own reflection in the display case, the young man gently opened his mouth, almost as if he was speaking to himself.

A high school girl in uniform emerged then, as if answering his call.

She wore glasses of her own and carried books under one arm. These were no

grimoires; they were all literary works purchased from a bookstore. The girl gave off a rather adult air and looked like an avid reader.

The girl spoke with a faint sigh mixed in.

“Yes. The mist phenomenon that occurred in the dead of night did not result in any casualties. The damage to the materials as a result of loss of magic is well within self-repair specifications, though no doubt the Gigafloat Management Corporation’s managers shall continue their inspections and countermeasures well into the night.”

The young man listened to her reply with a pleasant, satisfied smile.

“It has been a while, Shizuka.”

“Indeed...”

The girl looked up at the young man’s full figure, an expression coming over her that seemed somehow perturbed. She looked like an enforcer of school standards who’d found someone violating policy.

“I thought you might come here.”

“The museum’s ward was down, after all; normally I’d never have been able to make it in so easily... I suppose I should thank Aya Tokoyogi for that.”

“Even though you used her knowing this would be the result,” the girl rebuked.

The young man pretended not to hear her as he shifted his gaze back to the display case.

“Demon-Purging Twin Spear Type Zero, Fangzahn—you were careless to leave it in the Demon Sanctuary like this.”

“...It isn’t as if we could take it out, and it was, at any rate, a failed experiment.”

“Certainly. In one sense, it is a weapon well suited for me.”

Once he said this, the young man smirked. As he did so, the manacle on his left wrist emitted a metallic glimmer.

The manacle was linked to a single broken chain. Through the spatial control

of Natsuki Minamiya, warden of the prison barrier, it was connected to the prison interior even then. If Natsuki regained her magic, the prison barrier would reactivate, and the jailbreakers would be dragged back into the otherworldly prison once more.

“It would seem Natsuki Minamiya has regained her magical power,” the girl stated.

The young man quietly nodded and extended his hand toward the display case.

“...Quite so. However, it is too late.”

The black-lacquered spear on display emitted a resonant glow. That gray-white shine was the light of the Divine Oscillation Effect that nullified magical power and could rend through any barrier.

The young man’s manacle shattered, falling to pieces on the floor.

The wires holding the spear immobile blew away, breaking apart the display case in turn. As gravity pulled the weapon down, the young man grabbed it in midair. It looked as if the spear had flown into his hands of its own volition.

Now armed, he gave the spear a light twirl. The gesture had dexterity to it, as if he was testing a piece of gear he was thoroughly accustomed to. Satisfied, he turned and began walking off, seemingly having lost all interest in the museum.

“Where do you intend to go now, Meiga Itogami?” the girl asked from behind the sorcerer.

The young man stopped where he stood, looking back in amusement.

“Oh my—are you going to stop me, Paper Noise?”

He said it casually, not as a taunt; the girl inclined her head in a teasing motion.

“...I shall refrain. After all, I do not think even my power can stop you without killing you now that you wield Hell Wolf. Besides, letting you go brings no harm to the Lion King Agency.”

The young man smiled softly, though his eyes were full of a dark light that not even his glasses could conceal.

“I see. A wise decision, Shizuka. Well then...”

The sight of the young man carrying the spear melted into the dawn skyline and vanished.

As she watched him go, there was still a quiet smile evident on her beautiful lips.



The second night of the Hollow Eve Festival fast approached.

There were all kinds of events scheduled for the next and last day, but in practice, that night would be the main event: the big fireworks show that was the climax of the festival.

Eight thousand fireworks would be launched into the sky. Specially crafted by alchemy from the Demon Sanctuary, these special fireworks drew significant attention from both inside the country and out.

The stage for the show, the coast of Island East’s harbor district, was bustling with a great many dolled-up young people, including many lining the rooftops.

It was a scene scarcely believable for those who had engaged the prison barrier escapees in deadly combat a scant twenty-four hours before.

“She’s beautiful... Kojou Akatsuki sure brought a real babe with him...”

“The hell...is she a model? Long legs... Thin... Big breasts...”

“Apparently, they knew each other in middle school before he transferred... Crap, why does he have all the luck...?!”

Sayaka, tagging along with Yukina and Kojou on their way to watch the fireworks, stuck with them all the way to the appointed meeting place. She had no idea whatsoever why she was now surrounded by a group of boys unfamiliar to her.

“Er...ah, um...wait a...?”

These were mostly high school boys in the same class as Kojou Akatsuki. They were grossing her out, but they were a pretty harmless bunch nonetheless. They were practically hissing like snakes at how Sayaka’s beautiful visage was

now part of Kojou's social circle.

"Wh...what is this?! H-hey...save me, Kojou Akatsuki! *Gyaaah—!*"

Sayaka's anguished shriek made her festive mood evaporate into thin air.

Asagi was watching from the shadow of a bronze bust, smiling wryly as she watched Sayaka so desperate for escape.

"*Keh-keh-keh...* just as I planned. Well, that's what you get for bringing a babe like that out in public to a festival with boys from our class."

Don't take it personally, Kirasaka, mused Asagi to herself with a rather villainous grin.

Motoki Yaze, dressed in casual summer clothes and watching Asagi from behind, slumped his shoulders in exasperation.

"Whoa...I thought somethin' was up when you suddenly said, 'Let's all go watch the fireworks,' but this scheme is totally evil. You've fallen to the dark side, Asagi."

Rin Tsukishima narrowed her sparkling eyes. "Even the socially awkward Asagi has become quite resourceful, yes? Another thing we can thank Akatsuki for, perhaps?"

"Oh, shaddup," huffed Asagi, puffing up her cheeks.

"How much do you think I've suffered this festival? I have to get at least *some* payoff here."

Both of Asagi's clenched hands were shaking as she spoke.

Between the mysterious vanishing of magic and the unreal mistization of the man-made island, Asagi hadn't gotten a single wink of sleep until that afternoon. Before that, she was running for her life from one of the jailbreakers. *Even if I wish for at least one proper springtime-of-youth memory before the bitter end, I probably won't get one,* she thought to herself.

If I could have gotten Yukina Himeragi out of the picture, too, it'd be perfect—but I suppose it's all right. It's already time for stage two, Asagi thought as she reached for her cell phone.

She'd already called Nagisa Akatsuki and friends to bump into Yukina. She plotted to use the opportunity to quietly whisk Kojou away and disappear into the crowd with him.

But at that moment, Asagi's expression froze over. A red object was making its way to her through the congestion.

The voice of Lydianne Didier was quite loud over the external speaker.

"Ohh, empress! How fortuitous to meet you in a place like this!"

The four-legged tank's armor opened, and the redheaded grade school hacker, dressed in a pilot suit that looked like a school swimsuit, poked her head out.

As Lydianne pointed straight at her, Asagi wailed as if her voice had been turned inside out.

"Wh...wh...what are you doing *here*, Tanker?!"

Lydianne teasingly stuck out her tongue.

"You wrote, 'The more the merrier,' so I didn't think there was any problem with my joining the fray."

"*Ahg!* You, you took a peek at my e-mail?!"

"No, no, 'twas a simple accident. It wasn't encrypted or anything. Oopsie..."

"Don't *oopsie* me! What, you're saying I should've put quantum encryption on a fireworks rally invitation?!"

Rin and Yaze said, pitying tones mixed into their pained smiles, "...So this is what it means to be hoisted by your own petard?"

"Ain't it more like...what goes around comes around?"

With a mixture of various thoughts and feelings, the festival continued into the night.



Kojou and Yukina were walking along a side street slightly removed from the meeting place.

Both were in street clothes, but not *yukata*. Sayaka wanted to get Yukina into a *yukata*, but that made walking around with a spear rather inconvenient, so she had declined.

Speaking of Sayaka, they had stopped being able to hear her shrieks a short time earlier.

Kojou uneasily glanced behind him as he muttered, "Geez, is Kirasaka gonna be all right there...?"

Of course, Kojou didn't think his classmates could do much to harm a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency.

He was more concerned that Sayaka might wipe the floor with the schoolboys out of pure annoyance.

Yukina gave off a look much like Kojou's and added a sigh.

"I'd like to say she's all right when she doesn't push it, but she pushed it when she said she had to keep an eye on you... Sayaka's not very good with crowds."

"And she's supposed to be on her break. I feel bad for gettin' her wrapped up in that."

You wouldn't think she has so many weaknesses, sighed Kojou to himself, sympathizing with a strained smile.

But it was a fact that she'd saved him more than once in the last several days: deadly duels with the Meyer Sisters and one of the escaped prisoners and treating Kojou's wounds when he was on the brink of death. She'd also put in a lot of effort so that Kojou could drink her blood.

Kojou's face reddened as he subconsciously recalled precisely what her efforts had entailed.

Yukina shot him a glacial gaze; it was as if she'd been peeking inside Kojou's mind at the worst possible moment.

"I suppose so... It seems you and she went through quite a lot last night."

Kojou's breath caught at the blatant displeasure in her tone. *Uh...*

He'd optimistically expected that she wouldn't notice if he didn't say

anything, but apparently, she'd figured out that he'd tasted both Sayaka's and Yuuma's blood.

"I wonder if Kirasaka really is ticked off at me... That's more than enough to set her off..." Kojou mumbled to himself, slightly annoyed.

Yukina was watching the side of Kojou's face when she blinked several times. She looked like she couldn't believe he actually meant what he'd said.

Yukina made a shallow sigh as if she was sympathizing with Sayaka.

"I do not believe that is the case...but do be somewhat gentle with her, senpai."

The displeasure vanished from Yukina's warmly smiling face.

The two of them walked to a lonely corner of the harbor district, largely devoid of people.

They were a long way from the viewing spots in the fireworks rally guidebook; with the street lighting at the absolute minimum necessary level, it wasn't a place normal people would be in at all.

The two slipped through spaces between piled-up shipping containers and exited onto a cliff.

It seemed to be a place for cargo ships to weigh anchor, but Itogami Island had few freighters visiting at that time of year. Thanks to that, the view was quite splendid; the sea covered one's entire field of vision.

Kojou took out his cell phone to check something, feeling slightly uneasy.

"So this was where we were supposed to meet up...?"

Suddenly, the world was bathed in fresh light.

At a momentary delay, a subsequent *boom* made Kojou's and Yukina's skin quiver. Fireworks. The night sky bloomed with flowers of fire.

Yukina gazed upward, letting out a small sigh.

"Ah..."

Her two wide-open eyes contained a twinkle like that of an innocent child. The sky was vast; the fireworks were close. Their entire field of view was

deluged by light.

At some point, a very young girl came to stand next to them. She was small with an extravagant dress, looking much like a doll. She held her nose high, proud somehow of the stirred expressions Kojou and Yukina wore.

“Nice and out of the way, isn’t it? I usually reserve this spot for myself, but I’m making a special exception for the two of you, just this once.”

“Natsuki...”

Natsuki, still looking tiny, glared at Kojou with apparent dissatisfaction.

“Don’t call your homeroom teacher by her given name! Though I might permit you to call me Sana.”

Kojou groaned as he knelt down, exhausted.

“You really took a likin’ to that nickname, huh?”

Without planning it, his gaze was now at the same height as Natsuki’s.

Natsuki had heard they were heading out to watch the fireworks and got in touch, telling them to come to that spot. Perhaps that was her way of rewarding Kojou and Yukina for having gotten involved in the earlier incident.

Kojou waited for a pause in the fireworks before asking, “You’re headin’ back to the prison barrier, Natsuki?”

The prison barrier was something dreamed by its warden, Natsuki. To seal it away, she had to shut herself into another world and return to sleep once more.

She would not be in direct contact with anyone, nor would she age; she would be all alone.

That was the price she paid for her witch’s pact.

Natsuki looked back at Kojou’s eyes as she spoke.

“No need for concern. We shall meet again soon enough.”

The Natsuki that Kojou and Yukina had seen was a magical illusion while the real Natsuki continued to sleep. No doubt they’d meet the illusion of Natsuki soon enough. They’d be able to speak with her. But they would never meet the

real Natsuki again. At least, not until someone released her from the prison barrier.

Maybe that'll be my job as the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou thought to himself.

But Kojou could do nothing as he was then.

Kojou could hide his vampiric nature and go to school like a normal boy only because Natsuki was pulling strings behind the scenes. He'd always wondered how a "mere teacher" like her could pull off something like that. But now he understood why: because she was the warden of the prison barrier. If Kojou turned into an enemy of Itogami Island, Natsuki Minamiya would stop him, not as an English teacher at Saikai Academy, but as the warden of the prison barrier—the Witch of the Void.

Even the World's Mightiest Vampire could not escape the prison ward. It was precisely because Natsuki held the power to oppose Kojou that she'd been permitted to let him run free.

Put another way, Natsuki was the guarantor of the freedom Kojou currently enjoyed. As a teacher, she had protected Kojou, her pupil, all that time.

That was why Kojou couldn't just come out and say, *Okay, Natsuki, quit being the warden of the prison barrier*. So long as he was the one being protected, Kojou had no right to say such a thing. Not yet.

Yes—not yet.

Natsuki stated with her usual haughty tone, "Normal classes will resume first thing next week. Don't you dare be late."

It was the normalcy of everything that let Kojou smile and reply like usual.

"Got it, Natsuki."

"Don't call me Natsuki."

Her tiny palm smacked the tip of Kojou's nose, making him yelp as he fell back.

As he tipped over, Kojou felt someone gently embrace him from behind. He thought Yukina had come to his aid, but it was not so.

A lively-looking girl with a short bob supported Kojou's back as she smiled. She was wearing the same outfit she had on when she'd first arrived on Itogami Island.

Kojou glanced up at his very close friend, Yuuma Tokoyogi, with a look of surprise.

"Yuuma...?! Are your wounds all right?!"

Even if she had regained her Guardian, the damage to Yuuma's mind and body was great; he'd heard she'd have to stay at a hospital for a while.

"The Witch of...er, Ms. Minamiya gave me special, very temporary permission. You won't be seeing me again for a while, y'see."

There was only a hint of loneliness in Yuuma's smile. Even though she was a minor and had only been manipulated by her mother, she was still a high-up member of the criminal organization LCO. Even once she recovered from her injuries, she had a long police inquiry awaiting her...but—

For some reason, Kojou felt very sure of it as he spoke the words:

"But we *will* meet again."

Without doubt, Yuuma would be investigated as a criminal suspect. However, he was sure they wouldn't treat her too harshly. She was simply too valuable. The childhood friend of the Fourth Primogenitor had great value indeed.

Yuuma smiled as she raised both hands up.

"I'm sure we will. Probably in the not-too-distant future."

It was for a double high five. It was a good luck pose he'd done with her over and over when they played basketball together. It was a far more suitable farewell gesture between Kojou and her than any handshake would have been. *Sensible as always*, Kojou thought, as he likewise raised both hands. He moved to firmly slap his palms against hers.

But Kojou got nothing but air. Yuuma had abruptly dodged his move.

As Kojou's momentum sent him tumbling forward, she grabbed Kojou and pressed herself against his lips.

“Eh—?!”

Frozen stiff, Kojou couldn't get a single word out. Instead, it was Yukina who gasped.

Because Yuuma continued to embrace Kojou, even as she sent a teasing smile Yukina's way.

“I'm letting you borrow Kojou until then, Yukina. But the next round's mine.”

Only once she said this did she release Kojou. Natsuki sighed, exasperated, and snapped her fingers; suddenly, she and Yuuma melted into thin air and vanished. Escape via teleport.

The only ones left on the cliff were Kojou and Yukina.

Even now, countless fireworks were dancing above their heads. They heard pops and booms without pause.

However, all that seemed to take place in a land far, far away.

Yukina called out with a quiet voice.

“Senpai...”

For some reason, she was scarier when her expression was neutral.

“Wait. There's no way that was my fault. I was just a little careless.”

“I suppose so. However, you were full of openings, were you not, senpai? Did she not hijack your body just the other day?”

Yukina let her anger toward Kojou take over. Her fist barely tapped Kojou's sternum, but he felt it reverberate deep inside his chest.

“I'm always so *worried* about you...! Just yesterday, I thought you might die! Do you have *any* idea how that made me feel?!”

“Y...yeah. Sorry.”

“If you really think so, then don't do anything strange behind my back anymore! Be by my side and stay there!”

For Yukina, who rarely let her emotions show, this was no doubt very much how she really felt.

Kojou reflected somberly on what had happened. He might well have made Yukina worry entirely too much this time. No doubt it was better to behave and do as she said for a while.

Since he wasn't sure how long he was gonna be in the doghouse for, he figured he'd better ask to make sure.

"By your side...you mean until the fireworks rally's done?"

Yukina glared at Kojou with her eyes wide enough that it shocked him.

"And forever after that!!" she shouted.

Er, well, that's a little... Kojou visibly faltered. However, he didn't manage to get out a rebuttal—not when he sensed people stirring very close to them.



Their friends were standing right there in shock, gazing at Kojou and Yukina with astonishment. Kojou hadn't heard their footsteps whatsoever because of all the fireworks going off above them.

"...Y-Yukina...?! " Sayaka demanded, her face pale. "'Always by your side'...? Don't tell me you're propo—"

"Eh?!" replied Yukina in apparent bewilderment. Apparently, Sayaka had been listening starting from the midway point.

Even though Asagi, too, was rocking on her heels, she'd somehow begun to blaze with fighting spirit.

"T-to think you'd launch a frontal assault... Impressive..."

The look she regarded Yukina with was much like that of a sports player encountering an old rival.

Unsurprisingly, Yukina was thrown off quite fiercely when she realized just how her words were being taken.

"Ah, er—wait, please. What you heard was just me—"

However, her feelings being rather complicated to begin with, she had great difficulty explaining herself.

Yaze and Rin gazed at Yukina's behavior with obvious amusement.

And standing behind the rest of them, Nagisa's cheeks were red for some reason as she looked straight at Yukina.

"Yukina...that's so bold."

"I-it's not...I mean, as senpai's watcher... It's not what you think!!!"

Yukina's shout echoed through the night sky. Kojou felt detached from it all as he gazed above him.

Fresh explosions showered them all in twinkles of light.

Here, away from other prying eyes, the final curtain fell on the incident that had occurred during the boisterous festival.

Afterword

I vaguely remember writing something in the last afterword about increasing the publication pace, but before I knew it, we were at four months, same as usual. Sorry for the wait.

So, we've finally arrived at *Strike the Blood*, Vol. 5. With this, we've concluded the longer-than-I-expected Hollow Eve Festival Arc.

I had a bunch of final-day episodes that didn't get published with this volume, but they seemed like something I wanted to tack on in a different format if I could. The gist was to do a story centered around Kojou and Yukina alone, but I felt that it was best to split that off from this volume.

This time around, I had a lot of fun writing the scenes with all the escapees. I rarely have an opportunity to toss in as many different kinds of villains as I like, so I played around with fleshing them out. Actually, the one I fleshed out was the guy who got the hook the moment after he took the stage, but hey, that's life.

Now what *really* took some work were the clothes worn by the heroines. I couldn't reuse the same outfits, but even if I wanted them to get a change in wardrobe, new clothes wouldn't just fall into their laps, would they? So, my last resort was to have the girls get the nurse and *yukata* outfits as befit the progression of the story. The nurse and *yukata* outfits are absolutely not a reflection of the author's bizarre fetishes... Though it must be said that he doesn't exactly mind...

Actually, there's a comic version of *Strike the Blood* that has begun serialization. We've put the comic version in TATE-sensei's reliable hands. His drawings are detailed and poignant, and his story development has a good pace to it; it's so good, I think it outdoes the original work with room to spare. It's being serialized in *Monthly Dengeki Daioh*, and I'd love it if you checked it out.

And finally, I thank all of you readers of this book from the bottom of my heart. I truly hope to see you next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

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